

5.11.2012

To whom it may concern:

I am writing this because events have come to pass which have, regrettably, come to a great misunderstanding and great misrepresentation of my character. In the interest of clearing up these faults, I wish to provide to you an account of these events from my perspective, and to describe things that happened subsequently which are relevant but that are maybe not as widely known about. It is my aim to present the other side of the story so that the record may be set straight, and so that you may decide for yourself what should be done, if anything. Following this I will present some observations and opinions I have made regarding the Finnish Society organization itself that these events have led me to think about.

I will abstain as much as possible from using the names of the people involved, using only initials when necessary. If you are reading this, then you probably know their identities already.

I had not originally planned on going to the work-bee weekend and general meeting this spring, because I had been scheduled to work at my job on those days. But the job was very tough on my sanity and I had abruptly left it just before the weekend, so I packed a couple of sandwiches and some water, and found M willing to take me along in her car. Anxious over what was going to happen in finding other employment for the summer, and anxious about my employability in general, I hoped that a little physical labour and sauna would let me productively keep my mind off these concerns.

But this would not be the case: rambunctious children running around and making noise meant that I could hardly have a moment of peace to listen to the sounds of nature and the language, especially at the sauna, where I wanted it most. I tolerated it for as long as I could, and when I could put up with it no longer, I said, "I hate kids," and trudged off to go to sleep. I couldn't even sleep on my usual couch in the house because there was candy and toys all over it. So I went to one of the beds upstairs. I felt bad that I had to leave the gathering in such a way, but it was an expression directed at nobody in particular. (I do not enjoy working with children either, so it isn't a sentiment unique to this situation.)

At the meeting, the idea was brought up to prune the book collection in the house. I said that I would be willing to curate the collection, as I have great respect for older books and interest in book preservation, for historical and aesthetic reasons. This was vetoed by B, on the basis that since I cannot read them, I would not be able to evaluate the books on their literary merit. This I allowed, as it is a valid point, and eventually it was agreed that she would pick the books to weed, and that they would be left at the house for a while for others to inspect and/or claim

before they were discarded - or, as I suggested, to attempt to find a new owner for them first (be it a library or museum, else myself).

One comment that was made during these negotiations was: why save them when nobody will be able to read them in twenty years? As a linguist I can tell you that many minority languages meet this fate - but without any books in those languages for learning or for practice, people in the future who want to learn and revive the language will have a much more difficult time doing so.

The week after this, I managed to get back a job that I had and enjoyed a few summers ago. I was very relieved and excited to start working again the next Monday.

On Sunday night the entire Finnish Society board received an email from one of the board's own members. It made a number of accusations and demands:

1. That my comment about children at the camp offended somebody there (i.e. not the writer of the email),
2. That I beg for scraps from other campers,
3. That the above is not appropriate conduct for a board member and representative of the society in Thunder Bay for the Grand Festival,
4. Therefore, the board should rescind their decision to fund my trip to Thunder Bay, and
5. That I should resign from the board immediately.¹

I kept my silence in order to see how others would react before I did anything. I shall address each of these in turn below:

1. Personal issue between me and the offended party. I wrote her an apology and it was accepted. Situation resolved.
2. This has no basis in fact. While campers have given me food in the past, I do not idle around and beg for it. I have been offered breakfast and coffee and snacks. There was one weekend last year when I brought half a loaf of bread and canned food and I didn't eat any of it because people kept offering me sausage, potatoes, and so on. I don't bring a lot of food with me because I don't eat very much, not because I expect others to feed me.
3. These things took place outside of the formal meeting portion of the weekend, the only point where "board member conduct" would be considered relevant. Outside of it, we are all equal members. Being a board member doesn't carry the expectation that I must furnish all of my own supplies and transportation to the camp and be completely self-sustaining. If it does, it is unwritten and was never brought to my attention.

¹ I do not believe it is necessary here to quote the message verbatim. However, it is available upon request.

4. This is not up for negotiation - the motion to pay the travel expenses of the entire four-person delegation was passed by the board. In response to the accusations, one other person added, "We should send someone else, who speaks Finnish, because speaking Finnish is an important part of the festival." Even though I had already been confirmed as a performer for the festival weekend, and that the festival is an event open to the general public. Anybody can buy a ticket and attend, and the majority of the programming is in English.
5. Simply uncalled for, given the points above.

So I contacted the organizers in Thunder Bay and they were able to pay me in advance for my airfare (~~which ended up to be in excess of my honorarium payment, whose amount was then unknown~~),² and found a local family with whom I could stay (in my opinion, staying with locals is often a better experience than staying at a hotel).

Two months later, I was looking for a little retreat from the city to clear my mind and prepare the notes for my performances in Thunder Bay. B and I have irreconcilable differences which mean I can't go to the lake in the same car as her (we generally avoid each other anyway), and I knew that she was away in Finland at the time, so I called up her husband to ask if he would be willing to take me out there. His answer was, and these are his words, "No, because you don't behave yourself there." I was briefly interrupted by my boyfriend checking in on me at the door, and his father hung up on me. I called again to explain his misunderstanding of the incident (he had not been a witness; all he had was hearsay), but of course nobody can change his mind and he hung up on me again in the middle of it.

Crushed, I begged my boyfriend to tell his father the truth; maybe he'd listen to his own son, and besides, it'd show that he cared about his girlfriend. But perhaps he knows his father better than I do, and he knew that it would be utterly futile, so he didn't bother trying. I think that were it not for this, maybe our relationship would have lasted a bit longer...

At the festival in Thunder Bay, I spread my message of peace and cooperation and the freedom to embrace a culture you were not born or raised in. I volunteered to help sing for a choir that didn't have enough singers for some songs. I met a lot of people who I had a good time with, many non-Finnish-speaking. Equal treatment was upheld and I was reimbursed for my (minimal) expenses according to our board's original decision. I felt a bit bad about this, because it meant that I was doubly reimbursed. Were it not for the intimidation that arose earlier, I would

²Amendment 25.1.2013 - A cheque arrived in the post today from the organizers for the remainder of my honorarium, after subtracting the value of the advance payment.

not have requested the advance from the festival. I was not hoping to earn any money from the trip; only an opportunity to share what I know and what our Society has had the privilege to enjoy from having me.

When I returned, another member of the delegation (the one who said that only Finnish speakers should go) questions my Facebook photographs from the trip. "Where did you earn the right to wear the Finnish student cap? Lots of people in Thunder Bay were asking about it."

It is something that I explained during my presentations there and to anyone who approached and asked me - I know that some people feel very strongly that one must have earned it by graduating from high school in Finland - Indeed, a legitimate Finnish academic helped buy it for me, noting this caveat. I understand that it is a symbol of an academic student, and I wear it with pride as such a student myself. (I happen to also know of foreign students studying at Finnish universities who own one in order to fit in at Vappu festivities.) My donning the cap is done with respect for what it stands for, and is absolutely not merely in appropriation as fashion statement.

As for the old books - I never got a chance to see them, as I have not been able to visit the house at the lake since the spring, even though it was my idea that became the decision to have the viewing sessions. When I found out at the most recent meeting that they were packed and ready to be donated somewhere, I asked why I had not had the opportunity to view them, given that it's well-known that I do not own a car (carpooling conserves energy and I have offered to share the cost of gasoline with the driver, but hardly anyone has taken that offer when they do drive me there. Not to mention that student budgets make it very difficult to own a car when it is otherwise not necessary for typical student activities).

And I mentioned that, in all honesty, I hadn't really pursued every option to get transportation to the lake because I was under the impression that I was no longer welcome to be there, citing the phone call I described earlier. "You could have asked someone else to take you, I couldn't because I promised my wife that I would not take you there while she was away," he counters. This is the first time the board has heard of this phone call, the first time I heard of the existence of such a promise, and the first time that I was expected to have asked other people for rides after being told that I can't go there because I "can't behave" there.

I coerced a promise from him to show me the books before they go - I have made a friend here at the university who grew up in Finland and who would really appreciate having some reading material in Finnish so she can keep up her language abilities - but I have no expectation that he will make good on that promise. I'm content that the books are supposedly going to a museum. I simply do not wish to see them going to the dump. But for someone who claims to be so principled as to go on a one-man crusade/boycott against certain issues of work-bee

incentivization, keeping a promise to show somebody some things seems easy in comparison.

This is, to date, the extent of the events that have happened to me this past summer. I do not deny responsibility for them, but I hope that you can see that I am not alone to blame either. I do not seek retribution - I seek justice and your understanding. There are at least two sides to every story, and we should not let any one participant's voice be silenced, because in order to make amends, all sides need to be heard.

It seems to be quite ironic that some of the characters in this chain of events campaigned for their roles on the board with the idea that there needs to be more unity within the organization, yet do not themselves act in pursuit of it. I do not know their motives in treating me the way they have done, but they cannot take my Finnishness from me. One cannot choose their bloodline or their parents, but one's cultural identity is a choice that only that person himself can make.

“The Finland Society conveys an up-to-date image of Finland to the outside world....”
–from the front page of suomi-seura.fi

I believe that the keys for the survival and the unity of the Edmonton Finnish Society as an organization lie in two related issues: serving the community, and inclusivity.

Registered non-profit organizations have a responsibility to serve not only its membership but the public as well. (For example, a church group has activities for its congregation, but also has activities where they help out the community around them.) This is especially the case if the organization has obtained the privilege to use public money (i.e. casino revenue) for their activities. Every time we want to use that money, we have to make an application to the government detailing what it will be used for and how it will benefit the community.

Many cultural groups that I know about began as support networks for new immigrants. They provided these new immigrants with opportunities to interact with people who speak the same language and have similar life experiences, and to help each other make connections and settle down in the new country. They are places to make friends and that is good for immigrants, I do not disagree with that. But a group that intends to do only this, that holds activities primarily for the benefit of its own members, is more a private social club than a community organization.

I think that groups should be allowed to ask certain responsibilities of its members - even if it is as simple as charging a membership fee, or that members need to share the common interest that brings it together. But what a publicly-funded group cannot do is deny full membership or participation to anybody on the basis of language or ethnic differences, because it is considered

discrimination under Canadian law (Charter of Rights and Freedoms).

I have been in other ethnic / cultural groups. I have never taken a Scandinavian course at the university nor am I of Scandinavian heritage, but I am a member of the Scandinavian Club at the University of Alberta and was their secretary for a year. The “Asian Students on Kampus” group, which I have also been a part of, has members who are European-Canadians.³

Other groups I have seen: Thunder Bay’s Finlandia Club has members who are not Finnish. The websites for Finnish associations in both Calgary and Tucson, Arizona explicitly state that no Finnish heritage or background is required to be a member, only one’s interest in the culture. We may not have such wording, but actions speak much louder.

As a group affiliated with the Finland Society, we should be doing things that follow their intentions as well. Like many **contemporary** cultural groups, their objective is to share and educate the public about what Finland is about. (See the quote above.) *Heritage Days* is not the only opportunity for it. For example, the Calgary Hellenic Association has a weekend Greek festival every summer, and the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre offers Chinatown tours, events highlighting Chinese culture, and offers Chinese lessons. These groups have as a fundamental part of their mission to not only preserve their culture but to foster public appreciation of it.

To summarize, the difference between a social club and an organization on the public register is engagement with the public, that is, *sharing*. If we do not engage the public with our activities, we have certainly not earned the privilege of using public money. As it stands, I feel that we are paying only lip service to our responsibility to contribute to the greater community.

One opinion that I hear a lot from our membership is that the membership is aging and there’s nobody to replace it. Two types of people come to mind:

Recent immigrants. These join us only to find a leadership with attitudes and values stuck in the last century. They see a group of people stuck in the “a place to speak a common language” -mindset and not a group that represents what Finland is like now. Visiting and telephoning/ Skyping friends and family in Finland is a lot easier and cheaper now than it used to be. These recent immigrants are also products of the education reform of the 1970s and are typically highly educated, fluent in English, young- and middle-aged professionals. I don’t mean to say that they make better leaders, but I mean to say that all cultures change over time and that these are the people who represent its present state. Work with them and value their contributions, because the

³ They are a church-affiliated group, and I attended out of curiosity and to make friends, but I was never pressured to convert, and we volunteered our time around the campus area and at the Food Bank and the Mustard Seed soup kitchen.

number of university/college-educated Finns is only going to increase with time and what they value is only going to become more relevant and representative.

Youth.

1. Finnish-heritage youth. Social scientists have shown time and time again and take it as fact that a heritage language is lost within three generations, almost always. My parents moved to Canada and raised me speaking Chinese, but I will not know it well enough to pass it on to my own children with any fluency. Many of the Finns in Thunder Bay, who are descended from pioneer families that came and started the Finnish community there 100 years ago, do not speak it anymore and never learned it, nor did their parents. That has never made them less proud of their heritage, just as some Canadians are proud of their tiny little bit of Scottish or Ukrainian blood that is now diluted into barely anything.

This cannot stop them from celebrating their heritage or being part of a group in order to do so. My host mother (whose family is Finnish) in Thunder Bay doesn't speak Finnish but sings in it with the Oras Women's Choir. She and her Scottish-Canadian husband play Finnish music with the Pelimanni Orchestra. A perhaps familiar name to you is Marita Jämsä; she doesn't speak Finnish either but is well-respected in the Thunder Bay Finnish community for her singing and service to her church.

2. Non-Finnish youth. Canadian youth are surrounded by so many cultures that it is unreasonable to expect that they will stick only to the culture(s) that they are raised in. They have the freedom and the opportunity to choose for themselves one that they are not born into, whether it's an individual choice or for the sake of friendship or romantic relationship, or something else entirely. As some Finnish-heritage youth will decide to be more Canadian (or Irish or Japanese or whatever) than Finnish and drift away from the Finnish community, others will drift in. There will be youth who are still exploring their identities and might just be curious about Finnishness and want to know what it's about. What do you want them to learn about us?

Young people associate Finland with things like *Angry Birds*, *Nokia* phones, and *The Dudesons*, not quaint cottages at the lake and burly outdoorsmen. You don't get more young people to become members and bring their friends to Fork Lake just by putting up a basketball court

or throwing a big party with beer and prizes and freebies.⁴ Why go to the effort of finding transportation and making the 3-hour trip to an unfamiliar place when you can do the same things in town, with a bigger group of people your age? You need to draw them in by engaging their interests - giving them something that they can't get anywhere else. That's what brings interested outsiders in.

So highlight and demonstrate contemporary Finnish culture. Even if you feel that some contemporary pop culture is morally inappropriate or unfairly represent the country, their existence and appeal has to be acknowledged. I notice that the Calgary Finns periodically show fairly recent films with subtitles and charge the public a small admission fee. They have picnics at local parks inside the city that are easily accessible. In Thunder Bay, the Calgary representatives were browsing and purchasing new books (folktales in English) for their library and asking for advice on language teaching. (Seriously though, how often are we asked whether we have Finnish lessons? VERY often. And we have nothing to offer.)

We need to recognize that a group is a sum of all of its members: everybody has something to contribute, whether it is a skill or a viewpoint. Respect is not the same as tolerance. Tolerance does not solve any conflicts, only hides them under the surface. To have respect requires openness, cooperation, engagement, and listening to one another.

Ultimately, what is the "image of Finland" that we want to share? An "up-to-date" one, or a historical relic?

"I see a future [for Finnish identity]... Finnish language may not be as strong, but if we...accept people who aren't Finnish and [...] introduce them to the Finnish culture, I think it will be there."
 – a second-generation Finnish-American woman, age 71, quoted in:

Korkiasaari, J & Roinila, M. (2005). "Finnish North Americans Today".
Journal of Finnish Studies, 9(1), pp.98-116.

Thank you for reading, and I apologize for the length

Mildred Lau (aka Tuuli Mustasydän)

⁴ Not to mention that making "promotional materials" to give away at the party when it's mostly members who attend ... means the materials aren't actually doing any *promotional* work. Giving out leaflets or pins or pens at Heritage Days or putting up posters on community bulletin boards advertising events, however...

That being said, as much as I disapproved of the plans that went into this year's Midsummer party, I commend the ambition and the amount of enthusiasm the organizer had for it. We need more of that. If more volunteers were willing to take ownership of events and initiatives they choose to help out with, that can help make these things more lively. Others see when somebody is excited about what they're planning, and that sends out the impression that it's something worth going to.

Postscript, 20.12.2012

At the 11.11 general meeting, the delegation that went to Thunder Bay was asked to deliver short presentations about what we did there. The two participants who least wanted me to be at the festival seemed to continue to represent it as a "gathering of Finns from around the world," an opportunity to meet other Finns and learn about one's own culture.

Allow me to quote from the endorsements by various officials from the festival programme booklet:

Ulla Ahokas, Chair of the FinnThunder Organizing Committee:

...We are pleased and proud to be able to provide our visitors a weekend of enjoyable experiences and fabulous festivities. Whether you have travelled long distances... or have decided to be 'Finn for a Weekend' in our own city, we wish to express our sincere thanks to you all for being a part of the festival.

Risto Piipponen, Ambassador of Finland:

From 1940 onwards, [the festival] has brought together Finnish-Canadians and friends of Finland from all around Canada and even the USA to celebrate their heritage and love for Finland. Here we remember the generations, who came before us and worked so hard to help not only the Finnish-Canadian community, but Canada itself to prosper.

Bill Mauro, Member of Provincial Parliament for Thunder Bay-Atikokan:

Thunder Bay will be hosting FinnThunder 2012, inviting residents and visitors to join in this event... the efforts of your members and volunteers have contributed greatly to our diverse cultural community, by educating and increasing public awareness and appreciation of your traditions and heritage. Thank you.

Someone pointed out whether it was appropriate that I was not sent there on official meeting-type business, being a director and all. I understand the concern, and yet I think that what's being overlooked is that actively contributing to and sharing at the festival is substantial and meaningful in a way different from attending a few meetings for discussions and maybe some voting. I know that the trope is that Finns are generally reluctant to offer themselves for voluntary work. Surely somebody who can rise above the stereotype is worthy of some appreciation.

Later in the meeting some members were unhappy (and understandably so) that the membership at large was not consulted or notified about some large expenditures and sponsorships we had made over the year, until they showed up on the financial report on the tables in front of them. One director countered that transparency was not obliged because "you elected us, we make the decisions," to which I responded strongly and clearly that, if this is a democracy, an elected government acts on behalf of the people, not over the will of the people. Even if I was in that

government and thus complicit in the issue, I have the right to speak my mind on it.

When I went to purchase my ticket for this year's Christmas party, I was told that I would not be performing, and that if I had wanted to, I should have said something sooner. Never mind that I'd never had to offer myself for the last four parties running (they'd always assumed that I'd be performing something and approached me about it), and that there was no advertisement or call for performers. I talked to one of the directors, and found out that the president had proposed inviting me to perform, but that the proposal was struck down by vote without debate. I confirmed this with the president, and further discovered that the vote was a clear majority, without need for presidential tie-breaker. There was neither a long list of interested performers nor were performers being paid so there was no obvious reason to be selective. Only for myself was there a proposal and a vote. The other performers had expressed interest independently and were accepted without question.

Not only this, but the reason that was given to me when I first found out that I wasn't performing was not that I merely wasn't invited, but that "there was no time" for me on the programme. I know they wanted to have a shorter programme this year but even if the other two groups had 20 minutes each, I normally play between 10-15 minutes, and an hour is a respectable amount of programming for a banquet dinner. Not to mention that I am moving away from the city after I graduate in April 2013 and so this would have been my chance (the following party is for Vappu, i.e. in May) to say goodbye and thank you.

I declined to attend the party and returned my ticket because I didn't want to be watching my back the whole time there, since I don't know who I can trust anymore, and those whom I *do* trust were not attending either. I know that there are a lot of general members who enjoy coming to watch me do what I love to do. I just don't know who they are. I could have gone and let those curious ask me why I wasn't on stage, and tell them then, but I wanted to avoid the inevitable scene I'd cause and that'd be my only reason to go anyway. There's no good reason to go to a party if you're not going to have fun there.

I am no longer a director, but the leadership largely remains the same with the same veterans of many years. The one who said "we make the decisions [for you]" was not reelected either, but it is readily apparent that this attitude permeates the oligarchical leadership. They put their own selfish, petty grudges before what they knew would make the event enjoyable for more people.⁵ They have put their own interests first, before the interests of the membership and the community. I am more disappointed by this than by any of the personal incidents I have recounted throughout this paper.

⁵ There is one group of performers that have performed the same songs every year at Christmas for, as I am told, at least the last decade. It's tedious.

Since, as pointed out at the general meeting, Finnish Society of Edmonton membership confers no more than a vote and use of the lake property, I stand to gain from taking my membership monies to another organization that offers not only more diverse membership benefits, but also a leadership that takes steps (at least to appear) to listen to the membership and acts in the spirit of promoting community and sharing.

—ML (TM).

Jari: the Calgary club not only has a book and film library that members can borrow from, members also get discounts to their parties. I guess EdmFinnSoc has that 'library' of old books too, but it's at the lake, and its all old random history and fiction. And the Calgary place is a short walk from major bus routes...They post random fun trivia and culture news on their facebook page a lot too. In short, they're doing the outreach and sharing thing.

I'm being a little bit selective in my quotations - if you actually read all of the endorsement letters, some of them (esp. the Finnish-Canadian Cultural Federation and, to some extent, Suomi-Seura, oddly) do make it sound like it's a time for Finns to get together and rekindle friendships and get back in touch with their traditions and folklore and stuff like that. Some use the language that Canadians love to use, "celebrate culture and heritage", which is a politically correct euphemism for cultural exhibitionism (cf. "celebrating cultural diversity" = Heritage Days -like stuff) but to the uninitiated could be interpreted differently.

In many places, artists and musicians in their blurbs mention the aim of promoting Finnish culture through their work. That's what artists do! And lecturers wouldn't be lecturing if they didn't have something to share.

*See any **bold** text for very minute clarifications in the old text too (pp. 3,6).*

25.1. - And just now in the new newsletter it is said that the delegation to be sent to Sudbury for the festival this year will be "expected to attend daily meetings and bring back new ideas." Good job, guys.