

FUMC ESL 3-9-2015 Advanced Lesson

Have each person in the group read on paragraph of this article and explain the underlined words or phrases. Then discuss the questions at the bottom.

So Where You From?--Why must a foreign accent always invite an inquisition? by Iva R. Skoch

Americans are so nice. It's a shame, really. It wouldn't be so bad if nice people didn't like small talk so much, but they seem to love it. If you're an immigrant with an accent, as I am, your days will be filled with conversations with nice people.

It goes like this: I utter a simple "thank you" to a grocery store cashier, prompting an immediate "Where you from?". "Czech Republic" I say. "Really? My aunt went to Russia last year," she responds. What do I say to that? Do I go with the pointless, "That's nice" and beat a hasty retreat? Or do I say what I'm actually thinking: "What does that have to do with anything?" But that's rude. I try not to be rude--partly because I am an immigrant here (and there are few things more insufferable than ungrateful immigrants) and partly because being nice is contagious. I usually opt for the pointless.

Don't get me wrong, I haven't quite become a nice person. I often long for the rude anonymity of Europe. Back in 2000, when I was "fresh off the boat," as the not so nice folks say, I worked on the 24th floor of an office building in Seattle. How I dreaded those long 9 AM elevator rides. They were filled with the nicest people you'll ever meet. To make matters worse, they had all just spent an hour cooped up alone in their cars and were just dying to talk. "Could you press 24 for me, please?" I asked an elderly man. "Do I detect an accent?" he asks, all proud of himself. "Where are you from?"

Here we go. "Czech Republic," I say. "Ah, Czechoslovakia" he says. "It's actually the Czech Republic now," I explain politely. "The country split up in 1993." Undeterred he continues, "My friend's grandfather was from Czechoslovakia." "That's nice, I say and watch the elevator stop on the fifth and sixth floors. Please, I beg quietly, don't let him ask any more questions.

"So what brings you here?" he, of course, asks. "My husband is American," I say, knowing what's coming next. "What does your husband do?" "He is a lawyer. Don't hold it against me," I say, trying to soften the blow, since even nice people love to hate lawyers. It also buys time. He chuckles for a floor or two.

"How long have you been here?" he asks. "Just a year," I respond. "Well, your English is fantastic," he says. And this, I must admit, is very nice to hear. "Thank you," I say--but what I'm thinking is: "Clearly it isn't fantastic enough to allow me to be anonymous."

He gets out on the 18th floor. Now it's only me and three other people, with six floors still to go. "Where do you live in Seattle?" a young woman asks. "Belltown," I say. "No way! Me too," she exclaims. "What building?"

I've just told a group of complete strangers where I am from, what got me here, how long I've been here, my husband's occupation and where I live. Now they want me to reveal my address. "I'm sorry," I say. "I don't feel comfortable telling you that." "I didn't mean to offend you," she says, stiffly. "You didn't," I assure her. Finally, there is silence. But it isn't the anonymous silence I grew up with in Europe. Why do nice people have to ruin everything?

1-How many times have you had conversations like this?

2- Would these kinds of questions be considered rude in your country?

3- Do you think she prefers the "rude anonymity of Europe?"

4- Is "being nice" contagious? Is being rude contagious?

5- What does "nosey" mean? Is it a good or bad thing to be nosey?

6- Do people make jokes about lawyers in your country? Is there any other occupation that people joke about?

7- How do you get away from someone who is asking too many questions?

8- One of the reasons Americans ask lots of questions to "newcomers" is that we are a nation of immigrants. All of us came here from somewhere else, whether our ancestors arrived hundreds of years ago or last week. The "immigrant experience" is part of every American's DNA. Do you think Americans are more or less tolerant of immigrants because of this?

9- The other reason we ask questions is that Americans seem to be an inherently curious people. We really do want to know about you and your experiences. I ran into a fellow American waiting for a bus in Italy. The bus was late so we spent about 15 minutes talking. During that time I found out all about her family, a recent house fire she had experienced and lots of personal details. Do you find yourself sharing personal information more readily when you run into another person from your country?

9- Is your country becoming a nation of immigrants now? How do you feel about that?

10- We hear lots of news about the negative effects of immigration. People feel alienated and develop hostility towards their host country. The Boston Marathon bombing may have been a partial result of this alienation. What can the host country do to prevent this kind of alienation? What are the positive effects of immigration on a country that we don't often hear about?

11- When I was in Italy last year, a woman came into a restaurant and sat at the next table. We could tell from her accent that she was American. She proceeded to make herself completely obnoxious asking about the ingredients of every item on the menu and pressing the waiter for a guarantee that there was no "gluten" in any of their food. She grew loud and angry when the waiter said he couldn't absolutely guarantee there was no "gluten" in the recipes. My husband and I were so embarrassed and later apologized to the waiter for the woman's bad behavior. Do you feel responsible when you see people from your own country behaving badly here? Do you ever say anything to them?