Living abroad, we expected to miss out on American holidays. Well, after four Halloween parties and three Thanksgiving dinners, it is clear that our expectations were mistaken.

Why is it that we’ve celebrated these non-Finnish holidays more here than we would have in the States? One reason is that the celebrations we’ve attended have all been on different days, scattered about the actual date in America. Thus, a number of opportunities are available if, for example, an American in Helsinki wants to celebrate Thanksgiving.

Another reason stems from the fact that American culture is unique, and so her people are distinctive. An American in Finland feels this, because Finnish culture is very different. As a part of a cultural minority in Finland, an American can’t help but to become more Finn and less American over time. Celebrating the distinctively American holidays is a natural way to slow this process, and, perhaps more importantly, to honor one’s cultural roots.

I have been struck, in particular, by the American-Finns that we’ve met that have lived here for many years. On the one hand, I immediately recognize them as one of my own. However, it is also clear that they have become Finn as well. Some accept this change without regret, while for others it is clear that it is troubling.

Ron, an American that we recently met, was serving a tour in the U.S. Army in Germany when met his wife (a Finn). He’s from Colorado originally and says that he misses the mountains. In order to stay connected with American culture and current events, he listens to National Public Radio and watches NBC Nightly News every day. Yet, when Jen speaks her slang-ridden English, he says that he has to dig deep, and sometimes in vain, for long lost words and meaning. Incidentally, I have come to realize that Jen is an American-English-slang-master by listening to her speak while watching the frequent perplexed looks on the faces of these long time American-Finns.
It’s fair to say, I think, that for all of the American-Finns that I’ve met, the cultural metamorphosis that they are undergoing is difficult. I can’t help but to think of the countless immigrants that have come to America, and the clusters of people from similar cultures in the large cities and in places like Butte, where neighborhoods with ethnic names like Chinatown and Finntown existed. And I will no longer wonder why few Native Americans want to leave the reservation. Culture is powerful; loss of culture is traumatic.

Downtown Helsinki, November 26, 2006 at 3pm.

The darkness has become very noticeable. In the picture above it is 3pm on a clear day, and there’s still a month to go until winter solstice. I talked to a neighbor just today who said, “This is terrible.” He and his family are going to Thailand in two weeks for sun and warmth. We aren’t so lucky, though so far we are coping well.

Our best baby sitter: books from the library.

We need a new camera. Sorry for the blurry pictures.