Helsinki Journal, Entry 42, May 20, 2007

I just finished up with a four day trip for work that took me to two of Finland’s larger and most pleasant towns: Jyväskylä and Lappeenranta. The towns are situated on lakes and are typically Finnish: quiet, clean, efficient, modern-with-a-hint-of-the-old, and very nice.

My original plan for this journal was to show pictures from my trip, but Jen wanted the camera for her travels around Helsinki with her mom and brother, so I went without. This was actually a good thing, because I didn’t play the tourist. Beware of the camera when you travel!

So then, what to write about? Well, something from my trip comes to mind. In Lappeenranta the other evening, after a waitress spoke English to me without me having to ask, I turned to a student that I was having dinner with and said, “Is it obvious that I’m a foreigner?” Without hesitating, he replied, “Yes.” While I had no choice but to accept this, after having been in Finland for over 9 months, and feeling different in a way that I like, his answer was slightly devastating.

What is it that marked me? The answer, I think, is that even after 9 months in Finland, I remain American to the core.

What is it that marks each of us? A few things are obvious: genetics, family history, and our choices. Also, though, the culture in which we live lays a claim on our soul and sense of self. We carry it around with us wherever we go, and the astute – my waitress in Lappeenranta, for example – notice it.

What is culture? A previous journal entry instigated a debate about this question. I’ve thought about it and have decided that I have no idea. I just know that having lived abroad for nearly a year, I am more comfortable with my own (American) culture than
ever. Maybe it’s because I’ve seen that the rest of the world doesn’t take America anywhere near as seriously as do many Americans – both conservatives and liberals – and this has given me permission to lighten up about it as well. In fact, it occurs to me that “lighten up” will be my affirmation for myself in these last weeks of our stay, and maybe for life. Lord knows, I could stand to!