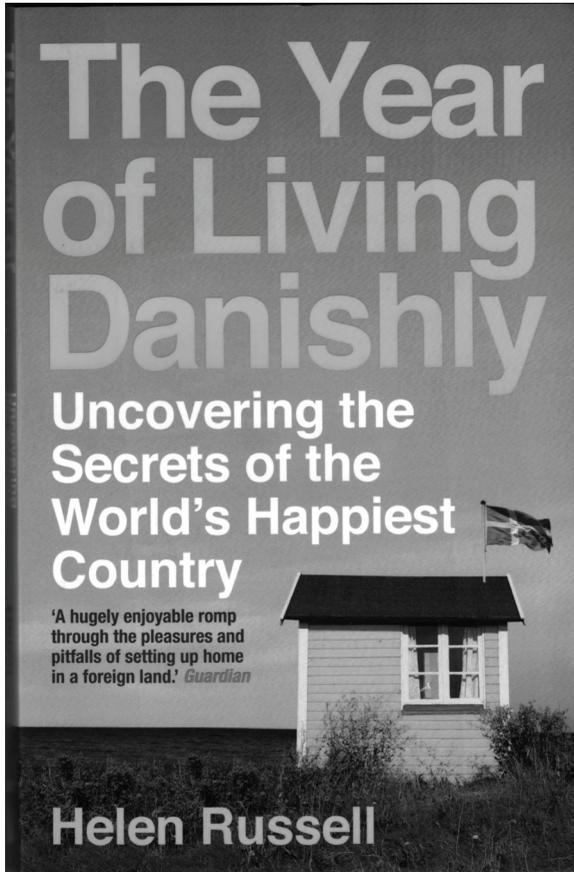


## Do You *Hygge*?



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Half of the world's happiest countries are Nordic, all of which have a penchant for *hygge*. Denmark happens to be at the top of the happiness list and, perhaps coincidentally, seems to have the greatest affinity for *hygge*. Michael Booth (*The Almost Nearly Perfect People*) goes so far as to claim, "Danes prize it more than ambergris and stardust." Is *hygge* the secret sauce to happiness, or is it just something that appeals to countries with few daylight hours during long winter months?

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## Do You *Hygge*?

Responses to the article entitled *Tea and the Pipe Organ*, which appeared in the last issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*, were truly exceptional. As I contemplated possible topics for this issue, I realized that those responses were foremost on my mind. The fact that they became the inspiration for the topic at hand compels me to share one from a customer who commenced a friendship with organist David Pizarro in 1973:

Sir / Madam,

I found the article about the organ company in your current catalog very interesting, but more importantly it reminded me of an old friend who was an organist and dedicated tea drinker. I met David Pizarro, the organist at a local church in 1973. I was in college, heard the strains of Bach while I was walking by, and was drawn in. David was about 20 years older, a bit flamboyant and controversial, but more importantly (from your perspective) he had a wonderful stainless steel and ceramic [*Teasmade™*] contraption" with a rotary timer that he used religiously (pun intended) so his tea would be freshly made and piping hot when he woke every morning. It looked something like this:



We had a number of adventures together, bound by our love of Bach organ music and, to a lesser extent, tea. David was promoted to one of the most auspicious positions in the US as organist and choirmaster of St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York, and passed away about 5 years ago. Please let me know if you'd like more information about him.

Sincerely,

S.G.P.

Newton, MA

Here is another example of a lifelong friendship that began with a shared love of music, enhanced by the mutual enjoyment of tea. Such experiences help us understand how

meaningful friendships are so integral to a fulfilling, happy life.

In recent weeks, a number of articles have been written about the Nordic concept of *hygge*. Pronunciation of this term varies by country, but one can get by with *HU-ga* (take *hu* from Victor *HUgo* and add *-ga* from *saga*) for a passable Danish pronunciation. *Hygge* can be described as the appreciation of simple pleasures, enjoyed in a comfortable and esthetic environment in the company of close friends. The concept captivated me from the start.

A brief article, entitled *Move Over, Marie Kondo: Make Room for the Hygge Hordes*, by Penelope Green, appeared in the *New York Times* in late December 2016. I soon discovered that a more comprehensive article on *hygge* was published in *The New Yorker* magazine just one week prior to the *New York Times* article. In that article, Anna Altman states:

Winter is the most *hygge* time of year. ... [It] can be found in a bakery and in the dry heat of a sauna in winter, surrounded by your naked neighbors. It's wholesome and nourishing, like porridge; Danish doctors recommend "tea and *hygge*" as a cure for the common cold. It's possible to *hygge* alone, wrapped in a flannel blanket with a cup of tea, but the true expression of *hygge* is joining with loved ones in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere.

I happened to be sitting in front of an open fire, listening to music on a snowy winter day and enjoying a cup of tea, when I first read this article. Could the enjoyment of a cup of tea, while listening to relaxing music be a form of *hygge*?

Further searches disclosed an earlier article, dated December 5, 2016, which appeared in *Time* magazine. Entitled *Hygge, the Nordic Trend That Could Help You Survive 2016*, Suyin Haynes states:

2016 has been a tough year, with a series of bruising political events, heartbreaking natural disasters and unexpected celebrity deaths. By some accounts, even the long-awaited episodes of *Gilmore Girls* didn't quite live up to expectations. Luckily, a centuries-old lifestyle concept exported from the Nordic countries may well be your key to survival in what remains of 2016.

You might not have heard about “hygge” yet, but the phonetically challenging lifestyle trend has taken the U.K. by storm and could be about to do the same in the U.S.

U.S. retailers will soon be selling products with a *hygge* theme, suggesting that we, too, can enjoy a cozy Nordic *hygge* experience by simply purchasing a lot of comfy stuff. But is this not contrary to the frugal Danish culture, which embraces a minimalist approach to enjoying everyday life? I needed to learn more.

The first thing I learned is that fully understanding and appreciating *hygge* may well require a Danish mindset. The second thing I learned is that it’s nearly impossible to have a Danish mindset unless you are Danish. This made me more curious.

A number of books with *hygge* in the title or subtitle have recently been published to help Nordic newbies navigate a *hyggeligt* life. After ordering a few that seemed credible, I spent some time searching the topic on the internet. I soon landed on the London edition of the website *timeout.com*, where I found Miriam Bouteba’s post on “the Danish cult of cosiness,” *Hygge is a waste of London*. There she takes a humorous jab at the concept:

... Denmark is a great country and the Danes have given us many wonderful things: cinnamon buns, schnapps at weddings, hot new punk band Yung, Sarah Lund’s jumper. But the concept of *hygge* feels entirely alien in our busy, ever-changing city. If the how-to-be-*hyggelig* guides are to be believed then we ought to stay indoors in our cosy, perfectly put-together homes – complete with roaring fires and enough candles to commission another series of ‘London’s Burning’. Which is all well and good out there in the countryside, where people own actual houses and there are delightfully snug pubs which also have roaring fires (albeit alongside an inferior selection of artisanal gins). But *hygge* doesn’t really work quite as well in a city of poky flatshares – many without living rooms, never mind fireplaces – where there’s a strong chance that your bedroom was once a cupboard.

...

Cosy is safe and it’s dull. It means complacency and idleness. Nothing spectacular ever happened to someone when they were feeling cosy. Snuggly jumpers are all well and good, but Sara

Lund didn’t sit around wearing hers in an artfully arranged apartment: that jumper was iconic because she was out wearing it in the bracing Danish cold, chasing crims.

London at its best is brilliant, bright and breath-taking in its newness. It comes complete with an inexhaustible to-do list: there’s always something new to see, to try, to eat. So put down that godawful guide to *hygge*, stop feeling all cosy, go out of the house and actually do something. Alternatively, leave the fun to us, grab yourself an extra blanket and go back to *fygging* sleep.

The entire blog post is too lengthy to include here, especially with the many heated, if not hostile, replies from *hygge* fans that felt the article was off point. Well, more than off point; to most it was: “offensive ... Ignorant rubbish ... Rude, misinformed and pretty insulting ... just plain pointless ...”

*Hygge* is evidently pretty sacrosanct. Seriously, however, the more informed and educated responses helped me learn much more about the topic than most of the books I have read. For those interested, a search on the article title, *Hygge is a waste of London*, is highly recommended. From there, you can link to ‘*Hygge is part of London*’: Bronte Aurell *defends the Scandi way of life*.

To further my education, I decided to read Helen Russell’s *The Year of Living Danishly*, the first chapter of which is entitled *Hygge & Home*.

Helen Russell’s story is fairly simple. She was enjoying a hectic but relatively happy life in London when her husband got a job offer to work for Lego, in Denmark. Reluctant to move, but more reluctant to jettison her husband’s opportunity, Helen agreed to a trial year in a country with a palpably unfamiliar culture.

In the end, one learns from *The Year of Living Danishly* that Denmark enjoys a highly developed culture, which has some pretty enviable values. Perhaps the most cherished of which is described in the prologue, which included the following:

Denmark was also the holder of a number of world records – from having the world’s best restaurant, in Copenhagen’s Noma, to being the most trusting nation and having the lowest tol-

erance for hierarchy. But it was the biggie that fascinated me: our potential new home was officially the *happiest country on earth*. The UN World Happiness Report put this down to a large gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, high life expectancy, a lack of corruption, a heightened sense of social support, freedom to make life choices and a culture of generosity.

First published in 2012, the *World Happiness Report* attempts to assign a happiness metric to over 150 countries. The entire 2016 update (3.4 Mb) can be downloaded at no charge. Among the vast data in that report is a detailed chart that assigns a happiness rating to each country based on the following positive factors: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, and generosity. Negative factors that alter the score are perceptions of corruption and dystopia.

The lowest scores are not surprising. Burundi, which has been torn apart by more than a decade of ethnic conflict, is last, with a score of 2.905. Second from the bottom, at position 156 is Syria, with a score of 3.069. With a score of 7.104, the U.S. is in 13th place.

The top 10 ranked countries are:

- |                |         |
|----------------|---------|
| 1. Denmark     | (7.526) |
| 2. Switzerland | (7.509) |
| 3. Iceland     | (7.501) |
| 4. Norway      | (7.498) |
| 5. Finland     | (7.413) |
| 6. Canada      | (7.404) |
| 7. Netherlands | (7.339) |
| 8. New Zealand | (7.334) |
| 9. Australia   | (7.313) |
| 10. Sweden     | (7.291) |

We see that half of the world's happiest countries are Nordic, all of which have a penchant for *hygge*. Denmark happens to be at the top of the list and, perhaps coincidentally, seems to have the greatest affinity for *hygge*. Michael Booth (*The Almost Nearly Perfect People*) goes so far as to claim, "Danes prize it more than ambergris and stardust."

To appreciate Danish culture, one must consider the incredible Danish history, which

predates the *Viking Age* (late 8th century to mid 11th century). Early on, Viking traders, "adventurers" and pirates dominated coastal areas of much of northern Europe.

When Harald "Blåtand" Gormsson (Harald Bluetooth) became King of Denmark in 958, a more formal pattern of territorial expansion commenced with the unification of Denmark and Norway. By 1800, the Danish colonial empire would cover over a million square miles spanning Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. It would all unravel by the middle of the 20th century, commencing when Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany.

Today, Denmark is roughly the size of Maryland in both area and population. With the passing of the Viking Age and the Danish colonial empire, Danes now look inward with pride on a culture with a long history and happy, bright future. Long winters with short daylight hours are enjoyed with convivial gatherings of friends in a comfortable, aesthetic environment. This appears to be the significance of *hygge*, which prescribes congeniality and inclusion, while it proscribes divisive and contentious dialogue.

I'm convinced that my enjoyment of music on a winter day, in front of an open fire, after shoveling snow for an hour, is pretty *hyggeligt*. It would be even more so if I invited a few neighbors over for a cup of tea!

Social networking is not very *hyggeligt*, since it lacks the requisite intimacy and coziness. Moreover, much of the dialogue on the internet leans more toward contention and exclusion, further distancing it from the concept of *hygge*. But whenever we connect to a Bluetooth network, we are channeling the spirit of the 10th century Danish king, Harald Bluetooth. The initials HB, in the ancient Nordic rune alphabet are ᚦ (h or hagall) and ᚷ (b or berkanan). When combined stylistically, these runes form the Bluetooth logo:

