

“Perspectives on the French”

By ISTP Parent, Ray Renati

In 1989, my life changed drastically for the better when I was introduced to Katie, my future wife, and to the country of France. Before that, I was just a bungling American boy, who ate with his elbows on the table, talked too loudly, didn't greet strangers enthusiastically, and had a clumsy sense of romance. I'm still exactly the same, but at least I'm aware of it.

The French know how to turn everyday experiences into near sacraments. For instance, when the standard American sees someone they know at the Safeway, they may say hello (or pretend not to see them) and quickly make a get-away. After all, we are so busy, right? Who can take the time to stop and talk to an acquaintance? But, a French person faced with the same situation would see this friend in the Safeway as an opportunity.

First, there are the kisses. Two French people meeting each other somehow communicate (I think telepathically) the number of kisses that each cheek will receive. There is never any confusion about this. As far as I can tell there are always between two and four kisses. Usually the smooches hit the air and not skin, but that's not important. What's important is that somehow each party knows precisely how many kisses per cheek, and which cheek is to receive the first kiss. There is never a hesitation or flinching of any kind. Then the conversation begins. And it always goes on for a very, very long time. Finally, when that is over, the goodbye phase commences. This I have dubbed as “The French Goodbye.” I actually plan for it now.

Whenever it's time to leave a party, I always make sure I build in a twenty minute buffer for the inevitable “French Goodbye,” which has multiple phases. The first phase begins with a passing remark that one must soon be going. Then this is dismissed, and both parties pretend that they didn't hear it, or say it. Then after another topic of conversation comes to a close, the person who received the original “goodbye-notice” cautiously brings up the topic of the impending departure. The original “Goodbye Initiator,” acts as though they had forgotten that they had to leave, and proceeds to thank the “Goodbye Receptor” for reminding them. Then, a physical move is made in the direction of the exit. It's a slow, gradual move in which the conversation continues often with an increased display of movement and excitement. It's sort of a distraction, like when a magician doesn't want you to notice that he's just pulled a pigeon from his sleeve. Both parties sort of levitate toward the exit. Then a full stop is made. There is a frenzy of small talk, more kisses of a predetermined, but unspoken number, and finally the exit.

My family is from Italy. I remember when I was a little boy, we had a similar way of departing. But over the decades, we lost it. And you know what? I missed it. In a way, being part of the “French Family” has brought me back to my roots, and for me that's been a very good thing.

“Perspectives on the French” Continued

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We were married in Versailles. It was April 1994. Katie’s father, the Vice Mayor of Versailles, Jean Blard would preside over the ceremony in the Hotel de Ville. The day before the wedding I woke up with a giant cold sore on my lip. It was the kind of cold sore that makes you look like you were recently exposed to weapons grade uranium. I covered up the sore as best as I could with some of Katie’s make-up, ate my breakfast of coffee and bread, and was whisked away to the coiffeur. Your standard French hairdresser makes most affordable American hairdressers look like sheep shearers. In fact, it was such a perfect hair cut that I actually had the feeling I wasn’t really me. I remember looking in the mirror and seeing this guy I didn’t know. Next we were rushed back to change into our wedding garb for the compulsory wedding photos. I donned my polyester monkey suit, and Katie her perfect wedding dress before being driven by Mr. Gomar, Jean’s private chauffeur (it’s a perk that mayors get) to The Trianon Palace where we frolicked among the gardens of Louis XIV, as one of Versailles most prestigious photo-journalists snapped away in the distance with his zoom lens. For reasons that I have never fully understood, my father-in-law seemed to have at his disposal endless numbers of service providers that would do whatever he needed. The photos made us look like the perfect people you see in picture frames at the drug store. Sometimes I look at one of those pictures that still sits on our mantle and I think, “who are those handsome kids?”

The civil ceremony went on without a hitch. Jean was moved and honored to preside over the wedding of his own daughter. My family didn’t understand a word. But it was touching to see my six foot, three inch; two hundred eighty pound brother shed a few tears. I’m not sure if he was touched by the ceremony, or if he was crying because of the back ache caused by the five foot long bed he had to sleep on in his 6 foot wide hotel room. After the ceremony we all took a short trek to a Catholic Church directly behind the City Hall. It was a strange looking building. Amongst all the beauty of Versailles stood one of the ugliest churches I have ever seen. On the outside, it looked more like a WWII bomb shelter than a church. Two Catholic priests were to preside over the wedding. In France, there is no wedding rehearsal as we’ve grown accustomed to in the States. In France you just show up and wing it. All you have to do is make sure you have that smile on your face that gives the appearance of being in total control. The two priests were from a Catholic order that somehow were given special permission to ignore the rules of the Second Vatican Council. That was the 1965 edict from Rome which took Latin out of the Catholic Mass, let people sing and play guitars in church, and to basically act like flower children if they wanted. As the wedding began, Katie and I knelt, our backs to the crowd, facing the altar. The elder of the priests slept. I wasn’t sure when I was supposed to say the “I dos”. I was nearly in a panic until at the precise moment I was to say my lines, the sleeping priest would wake up, give me a wink, I would say my line, and he would go back to sleep. This happened three times. He never missed a beat. I think he maybe was just resting his eyes. The younger priest said the mass in Latin with his back to the crowd. This was stuff straight out of my parent’s youth. I had only heard stories about it, but here it was going on right in front of me. I was wondering if these guys just didn’t get the memo. Anyway, he gave a sermon in French which I couldn’t understand a word of. From what I could surmise later on after grilling Katie about it, I understood her hesitancy to describe to me its content. Apparently, it had something to do with wifely subservience, and how the man must be in charge at all times. Later I mused how I knew I liked this priest the minute I met him earlier that afternoon. Such a wise man he was.