

Turning the Tables to Build Intercultural Friendships

By Thomas C. Smedley

Introduction

It's easy to associate with people from one's own culture. Why step out of your comfort zone to extend a friendly hand to someone from a different culture? Perhaps, if my experience is typical, to enjoy one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. This opportunity is readily available to Americans who wish to make the effort. To interact successfully with Turkish students and professionals in America, for example, the American host must navigate differing perceptions of family, society, and ultimate duty. By practicing role reversal, a person of good will can overcome the barriers of language, religion, and nationality. Allow the person getting help to become a helper, and the student to become a teacher. Take into consideration the enthusiasm many cultures have for personal relationships. You might find your own life changed for the better.

Americans in university cities can build lifelong friendships with sojourners from around the world. Year after year, bright and ambitious young people leave other countries to acquire an American degree, make American friends, and soak up a culture and language very different from their own. They have traveled halfway around the world to meet us. Traveling a few miles across the city is a small step by comparison, but the rewards are great.

My adventure in trans-cultural friendship combined a personal interest in the Turkish language and culture with a graduate school class. I analyzed interactions with Turkish sojourners in several different settings, wrote a scholarly paper, and completed the class. My family also made lifelong friendships with fascinating people. Much that we learned can be applied in other contexts.

Edward T. Hall describes Turkey as a "high context" culture, and America as "low context." In Turkey, much more time is devoted to developing the relationships behind transactions than in the transactions themselves (Gudykunst, 1979, pp. 45-54). Relationships, connections, and group harmony are the important values. The validity of the group is more important than individual rectitude.

Given these insights, it would appear that an American wishing to establish rapport with Turkish sojourners should understand the basic elements of Turkish culture. Beyond this, the technique of "turning tables" has value. Create a situation in which the guest can function as a host, the student as a teacher, the outsider as the portal to an alternate inside.

First adventure

In August 2004, I went to a local university to meet a "language partner." Picture a casually dressed, 50-something man walked through the parking with an elegant young woman. The director of the language partners program introduces them, gives them a list of suggested activities, and leaves it to them to make further arrangements.

"Dawn" is an engineer who wants help with her colloquial English. He wants to learn Turkish. Each wants to see the world through the eyes of the other culture.

The two arranged for a first meeting in a wide-open public place, the university's student union. They brought notebooks. He brought a Turkish elementary school primer. They sat on adjacent chairs and practiced reading aloud.

On the second meeting, same place, Dawn introduced her husband "Freedom." The researcher and Freedom chatted for a few minutes, discussing common interests in history and politics. The researcher apparently passed the test, since the couple extended an invitation to continue the lessons at their apartment.

When you are invited into a Turkish home, the researcher had learned, expect to be served food and drink, and be sure to bring a small gift. With

this in mind, he purchased a book at a used bookstore. He knocked on the door, greeted the couple, and stepped in. Freedom reminded him to leave his shoes at the door. The three chatted for a few minutes about history and politics, Dawn served tea and cookies, and they began doing language work.

This established the pattern the visits followed over the next 18 months. The American would speak to Freedom first, discussing Freedom's academic progress. He would present them a small gift, usually an inexpensive but thoughtfully chosen book. Dawn would serve tea and a snack of some kind – baklava, spinach cake, *yolprak dolmusa* (stuffed grape leaves), etc. The language partners would work together on their parallel projects while the husband was in the apartment. Week by week, I made progress in my Turkish textbook.

Since I am a professional writer, I also proofread Freedom's scholarly papers for colloquial correctness. Towards the end of the experience, I also helped Dawn translate three affidavits into clear English.

A few months into the adventure, the researcher invited his young friends over for a Thanksgiving dinner. The Turkish couple brought a bouquet of roses. Dawn brought a pair of fluffy slippers in a grocery bag to wear while visiting, which greatly fascinated the American six-year-old daughter. The families ate together, then sat in the living room and talked while the six and eight year old girls frolicked. The guests enjoyed being around children.

Some time later, Freedom and Dawn invited the researcher's family to their apartment for an Eid, the formal after-sunset feast held during Ramadan. That year, at the end of Ramadan, the researcher's family had their friends over for a Bayram dinner. Over the course of the project, the researcher had the Turkish couple over for dinner several times, and invited them to attend his daughter's wedding as valued friends of the family.

Towards the end of Freedom's master's degree program, Dawn got a job translating for a Turkish family that had come to the USA seeking

specialized medical care for their 13-year-old son. Dawn introduced the researcher to this family so that he could continue his informal self-study of Turkish. In May of 2006, Freedom completed his degree program, and the couple returned to Turkey.

I e-mailed them nearly twice as often as they e-mailed me (142 to 74). Fifty one times, these exchanges involved the kind of practical help that a native speaker of English can offer someone whose native language lies completely outside of the Indo-European family.

These numbers are not asymmetrical when weighed against the fact that I was a guest in their apartment approximately sixty times, and received from them the coaching I needed to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of Turkish.

Another goal of the encounters, to foster mutual understanding, was also apparently reached. In an e-mail from Turkey several months after their return Dawn wrote:

Turkish people are religious people (of course not all of them but the majority). I saw the same thing in the USA. From the cinemas and TV shows we watch through TV, American people seem like they don't care about religion and they are very free about what they do in their lives. I think in the real life it is not like that. As I see in your family, you care about your family very much and you try to teach your children about what is important in the life for you. I think it is same in Turkey. (Gençer, 2006)

Second adventure

A second adventure in acculturation involved a Turkish family sojourning in the USA to seek medical care for a seriously ill son. The project began when Dawn introduced everyone at the clinic lounge. Later social encounters included picnics, and a series of language exercises at the hospital cafeteria.

The "Smith" family consisted of "Henry," the father. "Margaret," the mother. "Janet," a 17-year old daughter, and "Eric," a son who had his 13th birthday while in a sterile ward of the hospital, undergoing bone marrow transplant therapy.

I met the family through Dawn, who had found work as a translator for the Smiths, helping them in their dealings with medical personnel. At one highly

stressful point in their sojourn, the daughter's student visa was revoked. Janet had curtailed her exchange student activities to find the university-connected health center whose services offered the last hope of saving her brother's life. As she was the only member of the family comfortable with the English language, Janet was needed at the hospital. Furthermore, Eric had only consented to the painful course of treatment because that ordeal gave him the opportunity to spend time with his beloved sister.

While Janet's visa situation was being negotiated, she, Henry, and Margaret composed affidavits to plead their case. Dawn translated these into English, to the best of her ability, and asked for my help with a final edit.

At the initial meeting, following Dawn's directions, I found the fourth floor children's lounge. Dawn took me in through the air lock, and explained how to put on the disposable overshoes. We went to Eric's room. He was seated in his bed wearing pajamas and playing a video game. Janet, the big sister, was also present. Dawn and the parents, Henry and Margaret, escorted me to a visitor's lounge.

We sat around a table, they offered me some donuts, and we conversed. Henry and Janet had an apartment near the hospital, but Margaret spent every night with her son in the hospital room. Dawn explained that American hospital personnel do not understand the intensity of the family bond in Turkish families. Apparently it would be unthinkable for a Turkish mother to leave a dangerously ill child in the care of strangers overnight. She slept in an overstuffed chair in the room.

Janet's visa problems were resolved, but I had banked some good will for my earlier efforts on their behalf. They were glad to hear that our church was praying for their son's healing. After all, Margaret explained through the interpreter Dawn, Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

I brought a few small presents, including a book of handy English phrases, listed with their Turkish equivalents, and the English repeated phonetically in the Turkish alphabet.

The Turkish tutorial sessions began in June 2006, and lasted almost six months.

For our first tutorial session, Henry greeted me with a smile, and led me to

the first floor cafeteria. He was cleanly dressed, but looked as though he'd missed shaving that day. I used an unobtrusive Olympus digital voice recorder to record the lessons. A continuous buzz of background conversation can be heard on the recording. Henry brought out several sheets of neatly hand-written Turkish sentences, and a brief essay describing his situation. The bulk of the conversation consisted of discussing the prepared lesson. I heard myself on tape frequently interrupting, and interjecting encouraging words (Yes! Yes!) and attempts at Turkish repartee. Henry spoke carefully, slowly, with frequent backtracking and repetition.

After we had talked for a bit over an hour, Henry asked, "Is that OK for today?"

"I've learned a little sentence in Turkish that goes like this: Affidersiniz. Kaybulduk. Bana yardım eder mi siniz?" I answered. (Excuse me. I'm lost. Can you help me?)

He laughed, I turned off the recorder, and we made arrangements to meet the next week.

Time after time, when we settled down to talk, Henry's careful preparations guided the remainder of the conversation. He was in charge, genial, and seemed to enjoy imparting information, in helping.

We exchanged frequent e-mails to set up or cancel our meetings. Henry spent at least five times as long coaching my Turkish as I did his English. In part this is because his English is much better than my Turkish.

Twice, Henry accepted an invitation to attend a picnic – one, on the Fourth of July, sponsored by my church. The other, a few weeks later, was sponsored by the Divan Cultural Center, a Cary, NC organization dedicated to fostering Turkish/American friendship. Both times, he and Margaret seemed to enjoy themselves, and delight in the opportunity to interact with other adults.

Even under conditions of weariness and extreme personal stress, this Turkish professional, a government-employed engineer, was unfailingly polite, and seemed to genuinely enjoy interacting with a sympathetic American. The format of becoming a tutor, a mentor, apparently provided a space of mastery during a time of uncertainty and anxiety.

Henry maintained control of the conversations, staying on the sure ground of a topic he knew well, the Turkish language. Although I was able to buy him a beverage once, he was careful to not let that happen again. When he attended a Fourth of July picnic sponsored by our church, he brought us a gift bag of imported delicacies. When he came to the Divan Cultural Center picnic, he timed his arrival to be after the food had already been mostly consumed. He was apparently wary of incurring asymmetrical obligations.

Conclusions

My family has “adopted” another young Turkish couple. This ongoing project involves several issues. How can an American establish rapport with people from a different nation, linguistic family, and religion? What can he learn once the rapport is established?

The technique of “turning tables” helped insights and perspectives to cross the boundaries. By becoming a student of the Turkish language, I allowed people who were immersed in an alien linguistic environment to feel at home, and to talk about a topic they knew very well. By demonstrating a sincere interest in, and respect for, their home culture, I helped them to feel at home in my culture. By fulfilling the Turkish expectations of guests, I helped guests in my country to fulfill the satisfying role of hosts.

The first project demonstrates the progress of a mutually satisfying and symmetrical relationship with a Turkish family over the course of nearly two years.

The second project demonstrates how important control can be to a Turkish sojourner whose life has been shaped by traumatic events beyond his control. Although Henry often looked tired, he was always punctual and fully engaged in our conversations. The heart of each encounter consisted of animated conversation in simplified English and Turkish, a great deal of laughter, and a sense of delight in being able to make ourselves clear to one another in the other’s language.

What insights were conveyed over the bridges thus built? To some extent, Turkish sojourners and immigrants do indeed bring with them “differing perceptions of family, society, and ultimate duty.” For example, to avoid offending Turkish sensibilities, the wise

westerner avoids extended contact with someone of the opposite sex unless the other party’s spouse is also present.

The longing all respondents expressed was for Americans to think beyond their own culture, and to take an interest in the different lives of people in other parts of the world. Given the Turkish enthusiasm for personal relationships, a small effort by a citizen of the United States can dramatically aid cultural understanding in both directions.

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