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Danish word hyggeligt defies translation

Jessica Colley

June 2, 2013

"The fish have to swim," I'm instructed as a glass of schnapps is placed in my hand. It's lunchtime in Copenhagen, and apparently, the fish atop rye bread I just gobbled down need to "swim." So I must drink.

I'm seated at this table the first time I hear it: *hyggeligt*. The Danes insist the word doesn't have a direct translation. It's often compared with "cozy," but this is incomplete, I'm told. Too simple. It's a feeling of contentment. It's about intimacy and candlelight and is one of the great pleasures of social life in Denmark.

I hadn't heard of a similar concept since *craic*, an Irish word that is similarly hard to define. One rainy Sunday in Dublin, I ducked into a pub with friends. We found the

snug (smoke room) empty and filled the table with Guinness. When singing started, and everyone had the cheeky look of contentment that accompanies Sunday afternoon pints, I thought: This moment of simple fun, this is *craic*.

Could the Danes have their own version of this? How would it be different, almost 800 miles away? After that *smørrebrød* lunch, I was determined to find that *hyggeligt* feeling.

I wanted to immerse myself in this distinctly Danish pleasure, to try to articulate my own definition.

The first thing I needed to figure out is what to look for. Would I know *hygge* when it slapped me in the face? Should I look for it, or sit down at a cafe and wait for it to sneak up on me?

I asked Christina Heinze Johansson, who works for Denmark's marketing board, for her opinion. We met in Copenhagen's former red-light district, Vesterbro, recently rejuvenated with new cafes, galleries and bars. Wandering along narrow streets, I wanted to know what Johansson associated with *hyggeligt*, what single moment springs to mind when asked to define it.

"In my childhood, my grandmother would pour me a bowl of homemade rød grød med fløde (red berry compote with cream)," she said. "I would sit in her blue farm kitchen, and she had curlers in her hair and Louis Armstrong on the transistor radio. It felt so cozy, safe, so *hyggeligt*."

Squeezing into a small coffee and record shop on a side street, I questioned her further. I was curious about the spontaneity of *hygge* - could you create this type of moment? Do you have to wait for it to happen?

"You can totally create it," Johansson said. "That is why us Danes use a lot of candlelight. Snuggling under a blanket on a winter's night, things like that can help create *hygge* for sure."

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I continued my search in the Meatpacking District, a neighborhood once dense with butchers and cattle, now clustered with bars and restaurants. I gripped the handrail on a flight of dimly lit stairs leading to Nose2Tail, a sustainable restaurant focused on using all parts of the animal. Would this space - a former butcher's cellar - be the opposite of *hyggeligt*, or *uhyggeligt*? One common association for *uhyggeligt* is a cold, dark basement. That and the film "Silence of the Lambs."

Rounding a corner into the basement, candles flickered on tabletops. Daily specials were scrawled on chalkboards. Henrik Thierlein, a Copenhagen native and food enthusiast, immediately noted the golden glow of the candles. "There is no *hygge* without lights."

Over a plate of sausages and local cheeses, Thierlein shared some *hyggeligt* memories.

"Sitting on a boat at dusk with city lights, that's *hygge*. Every year I go to Tivoli (amusement park) with a school friend. We eat outdoors with blankets and tea lights. We drink red wine, talk and joke. It's always such a *hyggeligt* dinner."

A definition began to take shape. A *hyggeligt* moment has it all: a sense of true friendship or love, generous time to eat and drink, and that signature candlelit glow.

After dinner I met Johansson in Mikkeller Beer Bar, a "phantom" microbrewery that brews in different locations throughout Europe and the United States. This downstairs beer bar offers 20 varieties on tap, with names such as the American Dream.

Groups of friends crowded around small tables. Glasses were raised, candles went out and were lit again. One more person was happily squeezed in at the bar. Taking a sip, I couldn't help but think: This is feeling quite *hyggeligt*.

Nothing was remarkable or particularly outstanding, but all my needs were met. I wanted for nothing - not even further explanation of the word.

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