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Sweet but sticky

By CATHERINE YİĞİT



The challenge of figuring out the school system. Dealing with constant and

unexpected changes of plan. Feeling the ground being pulled out from under our feet makes expats quick to adapt.

“You nearly have to be born into a place to know what’s going on and what to do.”

So says Jamesie Murphy to the English-born wife of an almost-local man in [John McGahern’s](#) outstanding description of Irish rural life *[That They May Face the Rising Sun](#)*.

Just as [St. Brendan](#) didn’t know he may have been the first European to set foot in North America, as an Irishwoman in Turkey I feel a strange sense of displacement. Expats may be able to duck-and-roll our way out of many circumstances yet the simplest things leave us wondering.

A few weeks ago I broke a friend’s dish. A simple accident, regretted all the more as the syrupy pumpkin dessert it contained also had to go in the bin. I did the most natural thing to me. I bought a replacement dish and gave it to her along with some hazelnuts. We routinely exchange produce from our garden or my husband’s homeland of [Giresun](#) with things from her own homeland of [Datça](#).

Instead of the usual ‘you shouldn’t have, but thank you’ the response was an emphatic refusal. “I’d feel bad,” she said and tried to hand it back.

After five minutes I succeeded in making her keep the dish. Still, my friend threatened to return it to me, filled with more dessert. This could lead to the dish being sent relentlessly back-and-forth between us, a never-ending reminder that by adhering to my own cultural norm to right a wrong I apparently did the wrong thing.

Where do our own ethics fit in the puzzle of intercultural relationships?

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St. Brendan the Navigator jigsaw by Rachel Arbuckle

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- **[Yazarc](#)**

Sezin, as you say the simplest things have larger ramifications. With a friend there is scope to learn from each other and work through any misunderstandings but with strangers, or even on more emotive topics, there's a wall of silence that comes down and prevents any further dialogue. Basic human rights may be globally-agreed on, but expanding beyond those rights we hit a limit where cultural practices take over. Who can say what's right or wrong in that grey foggy area?

Catherine I think that wall is what you've come up against in terms of educating your nieces. Even with access to education girls and women in Turkey do face disadvantages, often disguised by chivalry, that can leave them powerless. Relationships, even casual ones, are rife with gender discrimination on behalf of the participants and their families (it seems even casual relationships in Turkey involve the wider family).

Rachel, thank you for your comment. Living in Turkey has made me more relaxed about hugging strangers, or walking hand-in-hand with female friends, but I'll never forget my father's face when my brother-in-law linked arms with him for a walk on the promenade! Pink Pangea looks great and the name is terrific!

- **[Rachel](#)**

Hi Catherine,

I have had these same sorts of mishaps myself. Last summer, I traveled to Belarus and a woman who my friend put me in touch with showed me around the city. It was wonderful -- I was able to learn the history of the different neighborhoods and drink espresso in a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop. We spoke about the freedom of speech she lacks in Belarus and about life in general. At the end of the day, I gave her a big hug and she was completely stiff. The public display of exuberance was very un-Belarusian.

I invite to share more stories and pictures from your travels as a woman and tips for other women travelers at: <http://www.pinkpangea.wordpress.com>. Also, please get in touch at: pinkpangea@gmail.com

Looking forward to hearing from you,
Rachel

- **[Catherine Bayar](#)**

Thanks for this post, Catherine - there can be so many minefields about how we should behave within our adopted cultures that sometimes I'd rather stay home. However, explaining our 'odd' actions and attempting to understand each other without making a big fuss is essential, all the while keeping the proverbial salt shaker handy for those inevitable red wine spills!

But Sezin brings up an interesting point by taking your question about ethics into a bigger realm. For instance, I firmly believe that girls in our family should be as well educated as boys. My very traditional in-laws disagree with me. We've had numerous discussions over the years, yet ultimately I have very little influence about the education of my nieces, leaving me frustrated and feeling like I'm causing trouble with my "Western" views. In my opinion, they are hurting the girls' future. I have yet to find a good way to make peace with myself about how to deal with this.

- **[Sezin](#)**

The question of how ethics fit into intercultural relationships takes on another level when we relate it to the question of human rights. Consider that the United Nations has come up with a series of guidelines about basic human rights, such as the right to life, education, housing, gender equality, etc. and are generally accepted worldwide as benchmarks for each culture and society. However, if we take a contentious issue, for example female genital mutilation, then the discussion on ethics takes on shades of gray. We'll find human rights activists who are trying to eradicate what they consider to be a harmful practice against women and children and on the flip side we find activists who support this practice as a long-standing cultural institution.

In the end, we have to decide for ourselves what is or isn't appropriate and act accordingly, even if it may seem to clash with our guest country. And so long as we aren't hurting anybody, then I think it's a balance that's relatively easy to strike. Catherine, you may decide in the future that you won't try to replace something you've broken, but your first instinct will always go there because in your upbringing it is the correct and polite thing to do.

Thank you for this very thought-provoking post! You've given me lots more to ponder in the meantime.

- **[Yazarc](#)**

Thanks so much for all the replies and for sharing your stories.

Tara my friend is my stand-in SIL as none of DH's family live close to us. There are times when being the

Judith this friend is a close friend so like you say we can talk it through in time.

Anastasia that reaction to the red-wine spill is the opposite of what I'd expect. Can't figure out what made her so casual.

Brian, it's an awful feeling to help out and end up tripping on problems you never conceived of. Great that you and your MIL worked through it.

Figen the empty dish thing seems to be done with my neighbours, especially with asure. With friends I generally exchange dishes though it may take months to get them returned.

Valerie I've had dishes for ages in the past and was paranoid everytime I saw the people, wondering was I known as the one who kept their tableware. Oddly most dishes that arrive seem to be old and/or chipped...

It's so good to know that I'm not the only one who obsesses about these types of incidents. I tend to rerun them and wonder what the outcome would have been if I'd said or did things differently. Sometimes I consciously have to make the decision to mentally step back from the incident!

- **Figen Cakir**

All of this is confusing enough in one's own culture... what do you do, where do you look when you spill something at a party. But to do it - or have it happen to you - in a foreign culture where you can't see the reactions coming is something else.

For my own part, I find the whole 'dance' that Rose mentions of a dozen 'no's and vigorous shakes of the head which actually mean 'oh yes please, I'd love some' desperately tedious and a strain on the nerves. At what point does the supposedly casual dinner party get relaxed and friendly?

As a tip, I have my own way of stopping the back-and-forth dish ritual dead in its tracks. Whenever someone gives me something on a plate, I immediately go empty it in a dish of my own, wash theirs and promptly hand it back saying it will end up forgotten forever with me if they don't take it back pronto. Some may find it boorish (!) although people who know me know I mean well and how unaccustomed I am to the ritual. And I always make sure I share something I've made with these friends - taking back my dish right away! They laugh, perhaps with some secret feeling of relief that they don't have to return it to me either...

- **rosedeniz**

Catherine, I would say that you did the "right" thing based on what I've experienced. She was supposed to say no, you were supposed to insist. It's a kind of dance step where you might feel always off balance until the next plate appears.

Like Tara, I call in backup when I need to sort out a possible cultural misunderstanding, and have erred on the side of watching what others do and modeling. The key being model, not mimic. If it doesn't feel right to me, I don't do it, but I feel okay about stretching a little. The dish exchange is one I am familiar with, having been pressed to take something I haven't wanted many times (another plate of sweets, another deep fried treat). I take the dish, feed my kids and husband with it, and return with a non-Turkish baked good, like my too-soft and gooey chocolate cookies. Faced with serving a room full of guests who all say no to everything, I ritually put a plate in front of them as has been done to me. Based on the empty plate later, I assume I was right to serve rather than take a no as a no.

I have also been the victim of red wine on white furniture (which gave me pause as to why I thought it a good idea to buy white?), and in this case the culprit was handed another glass of wine and seated in a new chair while his wife frantically scrubbed at the chair. Faster than me, she had the stain out before I could protest. But she also told me my tasteless chicken and pasta dish was delicious over and over when I knew it wasn't, so go figure!

- **dutchessabroad**

"...it's a kind of dance step where you might feel always off balance until the next plate appears."

And that while you know you'd be a graceful dance partner, if only you'd be familiar(ized) with the dance.

In my initial first reply which disappeared after I typed in the CAPTCHA code, I compared the different cultures in which we worldburgers land to a jungle forest with appealing flora and fauna that at times threatens to strangle, poison or attack us. The supposedly familiar indoor plants take on different proportions with unknown properties when encountered in their original habitat.

The back and forth no-saying reminds me of the man who came from a culture where that was a common ritual. Imagine his surprise when he arrived in a world where "No" was respected as a solid no, on the first round and he remained without nourishment for the remainder of his visit.

- **Valerie**

@Anastasia Apologies if it is a close acquaintance, but my vote is for boor. Whenever we've had spills on our carpet, which is oddly fairly frequently, Turkish friends respond with concern and quick action. Last week Serdar spilled red wine on our carpet and neighbors ran upstairs to get a bottle of soda water to help deal with the stain. Of course, I say this as a boor myself, since the drawer under my oven contains at least two borrowed dishes that I've not gotten around to returning, full or empty, for over two years...

- **Anastasia**

Eek, there were a sister and mother involved (lost to demands of posting space) and they helped the friend accept the dish.... Catherine can tell us more.

I think this kind of interchange not only happens a lot but perhaps weighs on us more than others because it is, as Tara says, about our value system.

Catherine's report makes me revisit an incident that now looks very different. A Turkish acquaintance spilled a

@Anastasia Downplaying the incident of spilling red wine on your carpet for your sake? Wow that's deep. We go any deeper and we start to excuse plain bad behavior as cultural. I don't want to buy into that. Ah, but that's what it's all about, we don't know enough about the sensitivities and unspoken rules, and ours our different. It's true it's all very confusing.

- **Anastasia**

Hee hee...I tried! I find the Turks v. generous, so when in doubt an unimaginable depth of generosity might be the answer.

- **brian**

"a never-ending reminder that by adhering to my own cultural norm to right a wrong I apparently did the wrong thing." that is something I have experienced recently with my mother-in-law ,I watched her one day struggling with putting on her shoes ,she had both hands full and trying to squeeze her foot into her shoe ,i just naturally bent down and went to help her how wrong I was she was deeply offended and at the response I was confused and did not understand why? it bothered me

so much for a number of reasons one she was my mother-in-law and two I was only helping . a few hours later she apologized but what bothered me I had found myself in a uncomfortable situation through a helping gesture. it is just natural to me if I see someone struggling is to help . but like many others learning and adjusting is the challenge. brian

- **dutchessabroad**

@Brian,

You and your MIL, a picture to behold. If only your alter ego could have been holding the camera at the moment that you bent over to touch her feet (well okay, help her with her shoes). A Turkish Freud might have a field day with that beautiful image. If only you knew/ could know the symbolism and meaning of —what to you are mundane gestures— in the foreign culture.

I sympathize. Europeans are often mistaken when assuming they know America.

- **markandrewobrie (Mark O'Brien)**

RT @tweetmeme Sweet but sticky <http://tinyurl.com/yamhyoj>

- **dutchessabroad**

Dear Catherine,

Tara's points are where it's at.

I'd like to add, if you don't have a SIL to talk to, the friend whose dish you broke may become the one you turn to the next time you're at a loss concerning the cultural differences. All it takes is to confide in her the next time the dish exchanges hands, and to tell her what you told us.

Too often we think that the other knows our ways, even while (on the surface) the cultural differences seem apparent. Understanding and acknowledging that we all bring something new to the table, and that we need help to understand each other, can mend more than broken dishes.

As far as interpreting the "relentless back-and-forth" as a reminder of what you've done wrong, you have a choice to do that, or to see the exchange as a continuing sign of friendship.

- **Tara**

Oh Catherine - how many of these sticky situations I've found myself in! And I rely on three strategies to get me through: 1) Calling my Turkish sister-in-law, who is my age and like a real sister to me, she always tells me just what I should have done; 2) My Turkish language skills to explain how it is in my culture and to ask for forgiveness if I've done something out of the ordinary; 3) Humility - because I know that there are times that no matter what, I'm just not going to fit in or do it "right". At the end of the day, when I put myself to bed, if I feel like I handled it in a way that is in line with my values, then I try to be at peace with that. I don't think it's about what's right or wrong, but about understanding each other and finding a way for both sides to be comfortable.

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