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Why Я Is the Last Letter in the Russian Alphabet

By Marilyn Murray

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When I asked a Russian friend what he felt were the most important factors for foreigners to understand about Russian people, culture and country, he smiled, waved his arms and responded, "They cannot understand Russians, who act from their hearts, not from their heads. They do totally illogical things. To try and understand them with your mind is impossible. They are very passionate and act and feel in extremes. They love and hate in the extreme and do not comprehend balance.

"I think that learning how to have balance in all areas of our lives is probably one of the most important characteristics we as Russians need to acquire in order to be healthy. I know this is the case for me and my loved ones."

Many of my class participants relate that being balanced physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually is a major challenge. They often allow one or two of these aspects to dominate the others and problems emerge as a result. Their priorities also become

unbalanced in the areas of relationships, health, work, recreational activities and giving to others.

Extreme black-and-white, all-or-nothing responses are not exclusively Russian traits. As a child growing up in a small Kansas farming community, moderation or balance was frowned upon as being "wishy-washy" and "a fence-sitter." Once you made up your mind on something, you kept to it. While commitment and loyalty are admirable qualities, the ability to listen respectfully to opposing views and a willingness to admit personal errors are essential for growth. Otherwise, one stays bound to tradition, even if that practice proves to be harmful in the long run.

In Russia, adhering to traditional mores is de rigueur for many. But valuing and encouraging the many good traits of this culture, while also having the courage to confront and change the destructive beliefs and behaviors, becomes a pathway to a healthy life even though that journey is often difficult.

One of the most powerful Russian attributes is a long-standing custom of caring and generosity for family and friends. This was especially reinforced during Soviet times, when people often would not have survived famines, wars and oppression without the sacrificial help of others. For many, these actions are regarded as sacred obligations.

A primary issue for many Russians today involves learning the balance between how to be loving and caring for others, especially in times of crisis, and to bring aid to those who genuinely need it, while at the same time not enabling helplessness and dysfunction.

They feel compelled to emotionally and financially support family members even if these persons are abusive and actively addicted to alcohol, drugs or other damaging behaviors. To refuse to provide this support would bring down the wrath of the rest of the family and as a result, they usually continue facilitating victimizing behavior.

I understand their dilemma and because I want them to know they are not alone or different in their problems I share my own issues with them. When I started my personal therapy in the 1980s, the idea of "boundaries" was nonexistent for me. At that time, my definition of "boundary" was a fence. This word was not commonly used to denote the concept of being able to say "no" or to protect oneself from unhealthy actions of others.

When my therapist challenged me regarding my excessive caretaking behavior, I protested vehemently. I argued that my family, culture and church role-modeled and taught this was the loving, caring thing to do. After I had expounded, he then would quietly say, "But does it work? It is producing health for you and others?"

This cycle of protest and confrontation went on for weeks. Finally, I admitted my health was in shambles, and I was completely exhausted from consistently relegating my personal physical needs to the bottom of my priority list. Placing God first, all others second and myself always last had been the regulator of my life. But now I wanted to learn how to balance love and respect for God, self and others. That meant caring for my own health — not just for my benefit, but with the realization I then would have the strength to serve God and others out of love, not out of duty.

When my Russian students hear my story, they say, "Yes, that sounds like us."

During Soviet times, people were taught to rank the state and its interests first and foremost in their lives, coming ahead of family, friends and personal health. Devotion to the state took the place of God. These men and women were also trained to be responsible for the care of others and for their communal interests. They were to deny their own needs and to commit their time, energy and resources only for the state and others. "Я is the last letter in the alphabet" was taught from the time they were toddlers.

In a communally oriented society, boundaries were nonexistent and would have been considered rude, immoral and totally unacceptable. To confront this deeply ingrained belief system is extremely problematic for anyone here who attempts to change. But there always are those who are brave enough to try.

My Russian friend who told of his desire to find balance in his life also shared an event that occurred recently that confirmed to him he was on a healthy path.

He said traditions have always been very important in his family, especially accepting that anything an elder does or says is never to be confronted, even if it is abusive. Children were to obey and be controlled without question. But he also said there were many wonderful customs that he genuinely valued and wanted to keep.

He was struggling with how to balance loving and honoring his parents and extended family members, and still be able to set boundaries around behavior that he now realizes is often very dysfunctional.

He related that a few weeks ago, his wife was attending a seminar, and so he took their two children to visit his family in another city. His relatives all gathered together for dinner. During the evening, when all the children were enjoying playing with their cousins, one of the older relatives spoke harshly to the little ones for what was actually just childish behavior. My friend felt the children's actions had not deserved that type of severe rebuke, and he spoke up.

As respectfully as possible, he defended the children and then ushered them into the other room. That night, as he tucked his 8-year-old son into bed, the boy said, "Papa, during this whole trip, you were the only one who protected us. Thank you."

Then he hugged his father and said, "Papa, now you are not just my Dad. You are my best friend."

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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