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You Shouldn't Count on Russian Avos for Success

By Marilyn Murray

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She sat in the back row of my classroom with a shawl draped over her head and her dark brown hair was in a tight bun that made her look older than her stated age of 32. She looked depressed and often complained about her violent alcoholic father and how she and her 28-year-old sister detested still living with their parents.

When I asked her what her plans were for the future she replied, "I am a believer, and for two years I have been praying for God to give me an apartment so I can move." When I asked her what she was doing to enable herself to move, her answer was tinged with irritation, "I told you, I am praying for God to give me an apartment. "

I then asked if she had ever looked into what it would cost to rent a one-room apartment. She quickly responded, "No, I don't want to rent an apartment. I feel I am entitled to own an apartment of my own so I am praying for God to provide that for me."

As the classroom days progressed, she continued to play her "victim violin" about her miserable situation at home. She also expressed her frustration with God for not answering her prayers.

During our lessons, I discussed the importance of balancing our faith in God or a higher power to help us, but also realizing our own personal responsibility in any situation. "We should pray for potatoes but also pick up the hoe," I said.

At the end of the week, I challenged her to at least research the cost of renting a room in a communal apartment or asking some of her single female colleagues at work if they were interested in renting a small apartment with her. She continued to protest regarding lowering her expectations from owning her own place, but she ultimately agreed that she would try to check this out.

When she arrived at a higher level class over six months later, I hardly recognized her. She looked radiant and beautiful with her hair cascading across her shoulders and down her back. The shawl had disappeared.

She approached my desk with sparkling eyes and a delightful smile. I was pleased when she said, "I finally did what you suggested and no longer live in that very destructive alcoholic home. A colleague and I found a one-room apartment that we could afford, and I feel like a new person. I realize God answered my prayer but I also had to participate."

The story of this young woman reveals a crucial element that prevails here in Russia: a belief that someone or something else will provide my needs.

Under the Soviet system, people were told to be patient and wait and the system would endow them with the basic necessities of life. But these citizens were to be submissive and not create any problems. They became dependent and trusted that the state would take care of them.

Nine years ago, I was introduced to a unique Russian term called "avos," which is applicable here. This word has several meanings that can be applied in numerous areas. Avos can be defined as hoping for something to happen without any endeavor on my part. Russiapedia says: "Avos is the habit of relying totally on chance, on good luck, on good fate in the hope that everything will turn out well, even if there is no reason for that to happen. It is to hope that negative consequences will somehow be avoided and things will sort themselves out."

When I first asked my students about avos, a young man jumped up and said, "Oh, that's our favorite word!"

Since then, I've learned a great deal about avos. The positive attribute of avos involves the aspect of pure faith and trust. For many Russians, this is a deeply spiritual expression of total reliance upon God or a higher power.

But the negative element of avos evolves when it places all the responsibility for the outcome of a special event on someone or something else, and avos becomes an excuse for irresponsibility.

In the past, faith was placed in the Soviet system. When that system collapsed, there were throngs of foreigners who arrived in Russia with financial help and expertise, and some

Russians shifted their avos expectations to these newcomers.

I know this happened because of personal experience. In my early years in Russia, occasionally students who had traveled long distances would arrive for my classes with the belief that I would provide their registration fee and help with their travel expenses without having made any prior arrangements for scholarship funds.

I genuinely appreciated their desire to attend and knew we all would mutually benefit from having them in the class, and they were always very grateful for the opportunity. But my conundrum was the fact they expected to just show up and that I would be responsible and could be trusted to take care of them. They did not take into consideration that I might not have extra finances for these additional expenses and that it would create an extra burden for me.

I also have found that negative avos can be passive or active. The young woman who spent two years praying to God to provide her with her own apartment without making any effort on her part is a classic example of passive avos. The prospective students who arrived at my class with the expectation that I would take care of them without having arranged for this in advance portray active avos.

Over the years, many of my students have admitted they use both passive and active avos. They sometimes think they do not need to work or plan ahead and say to themselves, "Oh well, it will all work out in the end."

But they also admit how irritated they become when someone else uses avos with them. Several mentioned planning a small birthday party when they had very limited finances to buy food for a certain amount of people and how they ran into huge problems when many uninvited guests also arrived who assumed they would be served a substantial meal.

While these issues also occur in other cultures and countries, they are especially exacerbated here in Russia by the centuries-old tradition of avos.

My Russian students agree that while negative avos often is done innocently and with faith, it also can be rude, immature and irresponsible. It takes advantage of other people and encourages laziness. Individuals using avos in this manner do not consider the burden they create for others whom they expect to "magically" take care of the situation they have created.

These students now have committed to making major changes in their lives so that they are able to embrace the positive aspects of faith and trust while also becoming responsible, considerate adults.

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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