



2018

Hygge & Lykke: Good Old Danish Enclosures or Gates to a Brave New World?

Poul Houe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge>

 Part of the [European History Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Regional Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Houe, Poul (2018) "Hygge & Lykke: Good Old Danish Enclosures or Gates to a Brave New World?," *The Bridge*: Vol. 41 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol41/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Bridge by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Hygge & Lykke: Good Old Danish Enclosures or Gates to a Brave New World?

by
Poul Houe

Every year since becoming a Danish expat some forty-five years ago, I've spent part of each summer in Denmark. 2017 was no exception, but unlike previous years, this time I reflected explicitly on something most Danes probably take for granted or don't pay much attention to: their country's global reputation as the *hyggeligste* and *lykkeligste* place on Earth (although Denmark came second to Norway in the global happiness rankings in 2017).¹ Denmark's reputation as the happiest (*lykkeligste*) place on earth is increasingly matched by the claim that it harbors the coziest (*hyggeligste*) culture imaginable. Many observers and commentators have credited the Danes for their uniquely appealing way of life while trying to unlock "the secret of Danish happiness" and extract "a heartwarming lesson from Denmark" for the rest of the world. I'm sure many Danes acknowledge these attributes, but I'm not so sure they matter all that much in people's everyday lives.

So, what does this double window on Danish life actually show? A site where folksy is replacing inclusive and where communal smugness outperforms social trust? A comfort zone turned prison house where *hygge/lykke* may come with deficits that outweigh the benefits? Some sociologists suggest as much. Is there such a thing as Danish "exceptionalism," and if there is, what does it mean? What's the take-away for residents, expats, or Danish Americans? In this article, I will address the complexity of *hygge* and *lykke*: how the pair marks an identity that is intimate, yet publicly renowned; national, yet globally admired; and that signifies factual life, yet borders on fiction. *Hygge* and *lykke* represent a way of being but also an art of seduction that is indicative of current Danish—and perhaps Danish American—mores.

The stories that dominated the Danish national news cycle in August 2017 did not immediately square with the lauded image of Denmark. Most notable or bizarre was the story about the Swedish female journalist Kim Wall's disappearance while interviewing a Danish in-

ventor.² In short, the inventor, Peter Madsen, forty-six, had on August 10 by his own account invited Wall onboard his private submarine, a vessel he designed himself and the world's largest of its kind, but he claimed to have "dropped her off later that night in a remote section of the port of Copenhagen." So far, so good—had the boat not sunk later that night and the owner needed to be rescued. Because Wall did not show up where he allegedly had left her—or anywhere else—Madsen's explanation changed; he then claimed that she drowned in the accident and "that he had buried her at sea." Fast forward ten days, and a torso is found, missing all limbs and head—and though DNA identification is tricky after this much time in salt water it is finally proven to be Kim Wall's. Her journey in Madsen's tall tale—from safely escaping an accident to being the victim of anything but—thus evokes an image of Nordic *noir*, rather than one of *hygge* or *lykke*. Unless, of course, the story feels so far from Danish normalcy that most Danes consider these virtues unscathed by its trajectory.

The summer's other page-turner touched the nation's *hygge/lykke* at its symbolic core, the royal family, which in popular mythology is a thousand-year-old institution. The disruptor here was the prince consort, French-born Henrique, naturalized as Danish Prins Henrik, who openly took his long-known dissatisfaction with his secondary role as royal consort to a new extreme. Short of public recognition as Queen Margrethe's equal—and of the title of king—he now refused to keep his spouse company after death (in an already lavishly-designed tomb in Roskilde Cathedral, the official burial place for Danish royalty). What did Danes say to such a pronouncement? Well, a few deemed the man's calls for independence in the afterlife quite legitimate and less than earth-shaking, while most labeled his outbursts exceedingly vain for a man of privilege, if not disrespectful of a role he had once openly accepted.

One might note a parallel between this storyline and the one involving Madsen's U-boat and Wall's murder. For all their differences, neither tale seems of this world. Though both signify something real, it is reality bordering on the imaginary. In both cases, the serious (if not tragic) and laughable walk together—the very tandem that renders pertinent an affinity to the *hygge/lykke* aspect of the culture.

While each narrative may raise doubts about the everyday reality of this pertinence, they both invite affirmation of the values under siege.

For the consort of the purely symbolic head of state to make a lifelong spousal union end with death may not immediately conform with *hygge/lykke*, yet a separation expressly postponed till *after* life—a fairly happy life at that, as best we know—may for secular people, as most Danes are, seem to be quite a fictive outcome, anyway. Isn't any afterlife, at best, just an added benefit to mundanity? What Prins Henrik's message may have triggered is basically a good or bad taste in people's mouths. Nothing dramatic, once you allow the princely dust to settle (pun intended!), and nothing that blocks anyone's retreat to a *hygge-/lykkelig* going about their business as usual after the unwelcome intrusion into the nation's comfort zone. Conceivably, such a tempest in a teapot may even have reinforced the tea party's *hygge/lykke*.

Two different, if less flamboyant news stories also caught the Danish public's eye in the early part of August, followed by a third event at month's end. Unusually for rather peaceful Copenhagen, a spate of shootings erupted, almost daily, in the city's immigrant-saturated Nørrebro district. Apparently fallout from gang wars, the incidents rattled both the general public and its officials and made a dent in the capital's reputation as one of the continent's most livable urban centers, an impact no one should understate. That said, if you put the crisis in context, all of Denmark, with its 5.5 million people, has seen twelve gun-related homicides in 2017, compared to 10,595 such cases in the US with its 320 million people in the same period.³ Even considering the unheard-of increase in gun violence that Copenhagen has recently experienced, an American remains almost fifteen times more likely than a Dane to become a victim of gun-related homicide.

Similar proportions apply to the economic crime that captured August 2017 headlines, an apparently decade-long swindle with North Sea fishing quotas, involving both a variety of middlemen and high-level government ministers turning a blind eye to the scam unfolding right under their noses. No doubt a sinister and tangled affair unlikely to be resolved in the near future, it, too, must be put in context. Even assuming the legal consequences meet the gravity of experts' forecasts, it pales in comparison with such scams in the US.

The worst white-collar crimes in Denmark still bear no resemblance to the acts of Bernie Madoff and his ilk in America.

For someone eager to assess the scale of Denmark's frontline summer news, one final piece, which emerged in late August after my return to Minnesota, comes as a godsend. It concerns an old fee, *en afgift*, and tellingly not a tax. This fee goes back to 1922 and applies to such luxury goods as nuts! The nutty thing here was the government's wish to discourage people from making their own marzipan. Now, ninety-five years later, the government finally dared propose a reduction of the fee, but for days, if not weeks, the airwaves were humming with heated arguments *pro et con*, mixed with technical debates about which particular nuts should have their fees reduced and by how much.

The naughty Danish nickname for disputes of this nature is *flueknepperi*, fly "copulation" (with the naughtier word), but to observe American academic decorum, we may call it *passionate minimalism*. Whatever the lingo, my point is not to ridicule my homeland by equating, say, its admirable concerns for the safety of its capital's residents with its urge to distinguish between the financial rights of almonds versus pecans. Yet I do want to determine how scale matters. Is smallness, rightly understood, not only beautiful, but a prerequisite for *hygge*—and for the *lykke* with which *hygge* is to no small extent tied up? It often seems as easy for outsiders to romanticize or trivialize Denmark's minimalist scenarios as it is for insiders to exaggerate their import. Only somewhere between this Scylla and Charybdis are we likely to capture the complexity of Danish *hygge/lykke* and what makes their nexus compelling—for good *and* ill.

Some rumors—and cultural observers—date the origin of Denmark's particular *hygge/lykke* atmosphere back to her repeated losses on the battlefield. Her defeat in the second Schleswig war in 1864 proved especially decisive. It scarred the national consciousness deeply—but it also bred a new realism, which, in turn, helped restore *hygge/lykke*. In a big way, the formula for coping with the loss of 40 percent of her territory to the Germans was spelled out by Enrico Dalgas, founder of the Danish Heath Society, who articulated the philosophy of inwardly gaining what had been outwardly lost, and who put the country's money where his mouth was by literally draining the

swamps and claiming the barren Jutland moors for intensive agriculture (a process latter-day environmentalists would call into question). But even elsewhere, the national fabric turned more pragmatic and efficiently minimalist after 1864.

Successful dairy farming and production of bacon, for instance, overcame with a vengeance the setbacks late nineteenth-century farmers had experienced when their old crop production could not compete with Russia's and America's. In other walks of life, a similar turn was made toward small-scale economic efficiency combined with a foreign policy pragmatism that once and for all gave up traditional claims to greatness (and dispensed with sentiments of bitterness where such claims had proven self-destructive). Having learned from its history, Denmark began to adjust its traditional socio-cultural agenda to progressive modernity and to settle comfortably into what would become the role model for a small welfare state and society: a perfect framework for most everyone's *hygge/lykke*.

Or are we jumping to conclusions? Some would argue so, as the British journalist Patrick Kingsley did in his 2012 book *How to Be Danish: A Journey to the Cultural Heart of Denmark*. By his account, *hygge*, "often loosely translated as 'cosiness,'" is indeed everywhere in twenty-first-century Denmark. Kingsley explains, "When I first arrived in Denmark, I was surprised to hear many people describe all sorts of things as 'cosy'—yet he soon realized that "this seems both too broad and too specific a translation." For instance, Denmark actually has "the second-largest homes in Europe (in terms of square meters per capita)," so equating *hygge* with smallness seems a stretch. Yes, says Kingsley, *hygge* "refers to the warm state of relaxation in which Danes find themselves when they're sitting around a fire with friends, or having a beer in their beach house (another Danish mainstay) on the North Sea in the summer,"⁴ but as the size of their homes suggests, this atmosphere does not necessarily issue directly from a small space; it may as well reference a designer's success in creating warmth in a large space.

Even more telling are Kingsley's comments on the agricultural development I just touched upon. As food and its consumption are staples of many Danish *hygge/lykke* scenarios, a whole chapter in his book is devoted to Danish food culture past and present, including

links to the country's agriculture. But once again, there's a rub. While affirming what I referenced earlier, Kingsley adds an important twist. It's true enough that the late nineteenth century did witness agricultural modernization, be it through new technologies and priorities, or more profitable infrastructures, such as the widespread co-op movement, which dramatically stimulated both production and productivity. What is often forgotten, but invoked by Kingsley's focus on Danish food culture, is the price Danish rural culture paid for its techno-economic advancement.

Whereas farmers of old were directly and personally involved in producing their output, so that "there was a great deal of variety in Danish dairy products, and a great deal of expertise and interest in food production," the downside of this production scheme was "that the food being produced was of variable quality, and consequently unsuitable for export."⁵ The revolution in late nineteenth-century Danish agriculture reversed this trend. Danish bacon conquered the international market, dairy farmers migrated eastward and westward to teach the world the Danish ways—but at the cultural cost that variety and personal touch were sacrificed as co-ops steadily grew larger and their quality products ever more uniform. The bedrock of *hygge/lykke* around the dinner table was surrendered to spiritless standardization, which was already the dismal state of affairs when consumerism all but imperialized both the public and private spheres of Danish welfare culture in the late 1950s and 1960s. This is not to say that *hygge/lykke* was out, but that their way back in had to run counter to prevailing socioeconomic trends.

Even so, there is more to the complexity of *hygge/lykke*. Kingsley is right in quoting his countryman, sociologist Richard Jenkins, to that effect. Jenkins claims that the ideas of N. F. S. Grundtvig, who aided Denmark in restoring its national identity on new grounds after the Schleswig war upheavals had scaled her multicultural society down to a small homogeneity, cut both ways: creating short-term tolerance and inclusiveness, but intolerance and exclusiveness in the long term. In other words, "the solution that was found to the problems of Denmark in the mid-nineteenth century has created a new problem in the present."⁶ "Take, says Jenkins," as Kingsley quotes him:

the warmth and relaxation of *hygge* on a cold winter's evening. *Hygge*, however, is double-edged: it is necessarily exclusionary, because there are always boundaries to a magic circle, and it may also be controlling, particularly when it verges on the compulsory. Intolerance, actual and potential, is never too far away. The most obvious manifestations of this other side of Danish homogeneity are the Jante Law—small-minded, corrosive envy of achievement and difference—and xenophobia and racism, the total rejection of difference.⁷

Jenkins concludes the chapter in his book from which this quote is taken by adding a line that Kingsley had omitted: such rejection of difference “is a vivid and timely reminder, if one were needed, of the perilous uses to which it is possible to put the notion of the *folk*.”⁸ Jenkins clearly saw the cloud of populism hanging over *hyggelige/lykkelige* Denmark more than five years ago. And he realized that the small nation's claims to *hygge/lykke* under this cloud cannot be belittled as merely figments of the imagination.

How best to map the mental geography of Danish *hygge/lykke*? Having just alluded to populism and folksiness as markers, it behooves us to seek further guidance in at least a few popular, if not populist, lyric texts from the Danish canon past and present, one being Grundtvig's classical poem, “Et jævnt og muntert, virksomt liv paa Jord” (“A Simple, Cheerful Active Life on Earth”) from 1841, titled after its opening line, which continues: “Som det, jeg vilde ei med Kongens bytte” (A cup I'd not exchange for monarch's chalice).⁹ An even earlier and equally familiar Grundtvig poem, “Danmarks Trøst” (1820), is emblematic of the new sense of national identity that Grundtvig helped shape after the political and economic fallout from Denmark's losses in the Napoleonic wars, and to which today's concepts of *hygge/lykke* are also beholden.

The poem's title, added in 1842 and meaning “Denmark's Solace,” sets the tone of recovery in the text proper, where two lines especially pertain to our subject: “Vi er ikke skabte til Høihed og Blæst, / Ved Jorden at blive, det tjener os bedst!” (We are not created for tallness and winds, / to stay by the ground, that serves us best!). A later stanza ends on a similar note: “Og da har i Rigdom vi drevet det vidt, / Naar

Faa har for Meget og Færre for Lidt" (And then we have truly become rich, / when few have too much and fewer too little).¹⁰ Fast forward now to *Svantes viser*, the hugely popular 1972 collection of poems by Benny Andersen, himself a modern icon among Danish lyric poets. Unlike the Grundtvig quotes, which do not distinctly mention *hygge/lykke*, both the title and refrain of "Svantes lykkelige dag" ("Svante's Happy Day") do so, setting the terms for *lykke* this way: "Lykken er ikke det værste man har / og om lidt er kaffen klar" (Happiness is not the worst thing to have / and coffee will soon be served).

Whether in Grundtvig's nineteenth-century setting or in Andersen's time 150 years later, an upbeat mood is understated. It can be humble and earnest, an attitude exemplified by the phrases "a cup I'd not exchange for monarch's chalice," "we are not created for tallness and winds, / to stay by the ground, that serves us best!," and "and then we have truly become rich, / when few have too much and fewer too little," or illustrate the Danish litotic mode of humble pride ("happiness is not the worst thing to have"). What connects the former expression of *lykke* with *hygge* is the mention of coffee, both a staple of Danish *hygge* scenarios and emblematic of the *lykke* these exude: not the highfalutin' virtue that non-Danish pie-in-the-sky types might expect, but a habitual source of simple comfort. Real cultural sentiments meet as *hygge* and *lykke* in popular Danish poetry.

A different, but compatible fusion is on display in Danish actress Marie Søderberg's 2016 book *Hygge: The Danish Art of Happiness*. Her title and subtitle already suggest as much: *hygge* and *lykke* are conjoined as an art form, and visual images adorn most of the book's short texts on aspects of the *hygge/lykke* culture. Food and togetherness reign supreme as enablers of this artful life, and the volume ends with a telling "Hygge Dictionary" of fifty-nine composite terms, each including the word *hygge* as one part, from *Baggrundshygge* (background-hygge) to *Vovsehhygge* (dog-hygge) with a host of *hygge/lykke* opportunities listed alphabetically in between.¹¹ As the author notes, most of the compounds have *hygge* first (unlike the two I just mentioned), but regardless of the sequencing, "all the words have this in common: they tell us something about the things we do together—talk, eat, drink—togetherness things" and "they all share the same essence—hygge implies something that is relaxing, enjoyable, loveable and charming,

and something we do together.”¹² That said, the author ends by encouraging her readers to “Make Your Own Hygge-Words.” Talking about unfolding a mental geography, in this volume the reader will find most every *hygge/lykke* aspect located both verbally and visually.

Taking off from here, the rest of my article will address a few excursions and alternative routes into the mental landscape before us, beginning with some celebratory visits to its more attractive sites, and ending, like my opening remarks, with some skeptical and inquisitorial approaches to the same attractions—and to some less outstanding features, too. So, first off, there’s another small 2016 book on *The Cozy Life*, written and illustrated by a Danish Canadian entrepreneur and writer named Pia Edberg, whose lengthy subtitle almost says it all: *Rediscover the Joy of the Simple Things Through the Danish Concept of Hygge*. She begins by defining “hygge” and “the Danish concept of coziness ... the art of creating warmth, comfort, and wellbeing through connection, treasuring the moment, and surrounding yourself with things you love.”¹³ Key parts of the *hygge* universe she treats are, accordingly: simplicity, home, classlessness, old-fashioned ways, informality, care, trust, authenticity, balance, nostalgia, minimalism, and solitude. Money and materialism are held in low esteem, as opposed to slowing down one’s schedule, going for the round rather than the straight, looking for quality rather than quantity, nurturing memory and taking walks, gardening, and giving to others. Edberg roots for static and eclectic Danes rather than mobile and tech-fixated North Americans, yet she is a Danish American author with the clear intent to make *hygge* cross-pollinate her two continents. Rarely does Edberg’s *hygge*’s inclusivity turn exclusive, separating us from them—as the Jante Law warns—and her text is mostly unconditional in its praise of its subject, as when she labels Part 3 “The Hygge Lifestyle” (with “Hygge Is Everywhere” as its opening line) and Part 4 “Hygge and Wellbeing.” Punctuated with photos of cute Angora cats and drawings of knick-knacks, while pleading to “counteract an overly stuffed lifestyle,”¹⁴ her take on *hygge*, as a *lykke*-bringing mode, has the format of a self-help guide designed to bring *hygge* to mind by way of things so small or harmless that its spirit will not be trapped as it passes through or by them.

A different fusion and approach to *hygge* and *lykke* occurs in a third 2016 book, co-authored by Jessica Joelle Alexander, “an American columnist and mom living in Europe with her Danish husband and kids,” and Iben Dissing Sandahl, a licensed Danish psychotherapist and family counselor with a private practice outside Copenhagen. Their book is *The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids*; though centered on childrearing, it features *hygge* much the same way as the volumes discussed before (and with much the same international audience in mind): as quality time spent with family and friends, prizing the individual but the connection to others as well. Whether as teamwork or a broader form of togetherness, *hygge* marks a Danish identity that signifies an emotion American individualism and winner-take-all mentality is said to have little room for, despite all the research showing that such social ties decrease stress levels.¹⁵ In other words, rugged individualism is not as splendid as the way *hygge* “dramatically improves family get-togethers, which in turn dramatically affects our well-being and happiness.”¹⁶ And then follows, as in Edberg’s book, a series of tips for *hygge* attainment.

Like Jenkins and Kingsley, Helen Russell is a Brit, and she has spent an even longer time in Denmark than her two abovementioned countrymen; a London journalist, she followed her husband to rural Jutland as he took a position at the Lego company, and as its title indicates, her 2015 book *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World’s Happiest Country* is a reckoning of their first year as expats. Her style is rich in namedropping and other signs of a quasi-glamorous past and shows her grappling with the puzzles of an expat experience, yet in substance she adds little to the accounts of others. Take, for instance, her comments on *hygge* in *lykke*-land: most are in sync with the praise we’ve heard before. Teaching children the value of volunteering and doing service to society; enjoying meals at home, or a cup of tea or aquavit to alleviate a minor health issue; lighting a candle or two; enjoying a stress-free social time in whichever shape or form; realizing that neighbors huddling by themselves instead of with you on a wintery day don’t mean to offend you but want only to indulge in their own *hygge*—¹⁷ none of this contradicts any lessons by Edberg & Co.

Only rarely does Russell assume a critical angle on her host country, and her otherwise appreciative reviewer in the *Independent* is right in calling it “a shame that Russell doesn’t try a bit harder to scratch Denmark’s glossy magazine image.”¹⁸ Yes, she does deem it a consensus culture embedded in a difficult vernacular; yes, it’s an imperfect place (but probably the least miserable one on the planet—for instance in terms of women’s rights); yes, there is an inward-looking bent in the culture, and the suicide rate is high, like feeling blue with a tan; also, there are unwritten rules for everything—even picking Christmas decorations—in this land of social trust; and yes, a certain welfare complacency results in considerable consumption of tobacco and alcohol, typically termed a “controlled loss of control.”¹⁹ Even so, these are but dents in an impressive sociocultural fabric—not symptoms of graver deficits, as Jenkins and even Kingsley suggested. On a scale from a bad 1 to a good 10, Russell, in an interview, gives Denmark 8½!²⁰

Much different is the thick volume on *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia*, penned one year earlier, in 2014, by Russell’s countryman Michael Booth. Unlike Russell’s tome, this one is about all of Scandinavia, though it does zoom in on each country. Permit me to quote at some length from my 2015 review of Booth’s text, first of its view of the Nordic scene in general, and next of its particular take on Danish *lykke/hygge*:

The author of this book is a Brit residing in Denmark and married to a native Dane. A tightrope-walking journalistic juggler, suspended between his title’s reluctant admiration of the Nordic countries and his subtitle’s pseudo-objective delight in debunking their virtues, he labors with some success to keep his balance and do justice to both sides. Booth is fascinated by the record-setting happiness the world so obsesses about in modern Scandinavia. He finds much of the alleged bliss inconsistent with the reality on the ground he has come to know, chiefly from living in Denmark and touring the other Nordic countries. An urge to drive a critical wedge—and to build a bridge of understanding—between these conflicting perceptions propels his book and accounts for much of its idiosyncratic zeal and entertaining wit.

His journey through the maze of contradictions and ambiguities starts in his adopted Denmark, the happiest of nations. He detects the source of its happiness in the social communion that has arisen around Denmark's incessant historical loss of power. An equally shared experience, it yielded the social trust from which the Danish welfare state emerged. Secular Lutheran with a vengeance, Denmark has managed to sustain this costly design; but the inclusiveness has come at the price of vindictive social controls like the so-called *Jante* law, hidden by a facade of *hygge*, or coziness. The accretion of denial and complacency shows in prohibitive taxes, decreasing equality, schools promoting social cohesion by tilting towards lowest common denominators, and welfare recipients exploiting the system's vulnerability.²¹

My point here is not to pass judgment on Booth's work but to use its distance from more sympathetic commentators on Danish *hyggelykke* to frame a few double-edged responses to this touted celebrity signature. Three more Anglo-Saxon pieces, two British and one American, will point to both fusion and disruption in the *hyggelykke* phenomenology before some native voices can be heard adding their tone to the mixed perceptions of Danish cultural persona.

An interview article in *BBC News Magazine* rounds up the usual suspects.²² Titled "Hygge: A heart-warming lesson from Denmark," the article highlights the atmosphere of family and home, small indoor environments in wintry seasons, relaxing amidst meals and drinks, "not punishing or denying yourself anything," but putting up candles even in the windows of a camper. *Hygge* is "pretty hard ... to describe because it is so abstract," as one interviewee describes it; but it "isn't restricted to Denmark, so why is it so hard to describe without borrowing a Danish word?" One translator answers that "hygge was never meant to be translated—it was meant to be felt," while a more elaborate exposition issues from Kingsley's *How To Be Danish* that we visited earlier. To the BBC he repeats, "in essence hygge is about a group of slightly gloomy friends huddling under the duvet on a cold winter's night. And there is little more British than that." So, uniquely

Danish *hygge* is a fuser, working across national borders—including the North Sea!²³

Erica Wagner's "Hygge: the secret of Danish happiness" in *New Statesman* counts the untranslatable eponymous word among those, "like 'chutzpah' or 'Schadenfreude', that simply are themselves."²⁴ But for all the phenomenon's virtues, she also enumerates shadows and refers to Meik Wiking, CEO of the Danish Happiness Research Institute, for highlighting the high Danish suicide rates and the challenge of being unhappy "in an otherwise contented place."²⁵ Another source of Wagner's, a Danish gay man who often brings his French partner to Denmark, finds the ideal of *hygge* directly oppressive, while Wagner's own experience in Copenhagen hits a middle ground: *hygge* can be perfect "for a few days"! Ending with a reference to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, in which life can be "walking on knife's blades," and one more to the Egtved Girl, who was cozily buried for 3,400 years, Wagner concludes that *hygge* may well be here to stay—for worse as much as for better!

An article from *The New Yorker* on "The Year of Hygge, the Danish Obsession with Getting Cozy," by Anna Altman, offers an American condensation of the *hygge/lykke* complex. Like Swedish *lagom* ("adequate," "just right," or "in balance"), Danish *hygge* holds the "vision of restrained pleasure," a "measured experience: indulging in a piece of cake, but not outright gluttony; a dinner with friends at home, but nothing fancy."²⁶ As others have done, Altman points to the *Jante* aspect of *hygge*, the restriction it puts on individual autonomy. *Hygge's* front side is "humble, decent, and community-oriented," its flipside "a rejection of what's different and unfamiliar." Citing Danish historian Bo Lidegaard, many Danes endorse "a multiethnic society" but claim that they "are not and should never become a multicultural society."

If *hygge* nationally entails fusion and division in one gesture, its international impact, according to Altman, is no less Janus-faced, although both the fusion and division are situated differently. Bourgeois Americans, for instance, relish this philosophy of daily life as much as any Dane: "still lifes of hands cradling a mug, candles lit at dusk on a picnic table, bikes with woven baskets and child safety seats leaning against a colorful brick wall. Artisanal this and homemade that,

fetishizing what's rustic as authentic, what's simple as sophisticated: urban American sophisticates already know this aesthetic; we've aspired to it for a long time." But the American flipside is another story: "What many Americans do not aspire to is Scandinavia's high taxes or socialist ideas. When transferred to the United States, the kind of understated luxury that Danes consider a shared national trait starts to seem like little more than a symbol of economic status—the very thing that Scandinavian countries have sought to jettison." Though *hygge* may promise the *lykke* of having your cake and eating it, it is sliced differently in different cultures.²⁷

I return from these outsider observations to my initial impressions of *hygge/lykke* in Denmark as viewed by insiders—via a brief allusion to Anu Partanen's 2016 book *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life*. Partanen, a recent Finnish immigrant and resident of New York City, is eager to explore a possible fusion of Nordic and American values, of which the former, excerpted in her text from all the Nordic countries, is called the Nordic theory of love, now "an overarching philosophy about how to structure a society," "albeit its aim of well-being is 'widely misunderstood in America' as dubious welfare."²⁸ Hers is, as were others', a genuine desire for cultural fusion no matter how questionable its prospects.

As this mix of appealing coherence and lurking incoherence was precisely what struck me in Denmark in the summer of 2017, let me end by adding to the mix a few local voices to the same effect. *Hyggelykke* may not be the carefree partnership conventional wisdom imagines, but it may well, as a truer figment of the imagination, be all the better suited to reveal, without evoking undue resistance, the imagined community it signifies. On the positive side, the Danish flag, *Dannebrog*, is officially associated with the slogan: Happiest place on earth!²⁹ Leading grocery store chains advertise food items under the heading "Sammen om hyggen" (Together we practice *hygge*).³⁰ When Queen Margrethe in her 2011 New Year's address to the Danes proclaimed that egotism was evolving among them at the expense of community, the foremost Danish specialist in value research objected. All studies showed, he said, that social trust and tolerance among Danes had never been more evident.³¹

But then there is this: a slew of negative signals from the same society and culture. “Denmark is writing yet another dark chapter in its history” was the title of an article by the party leader of the Christian Democrats, with a subtitle that calls a detention center for rejected asylum seekers “the closest Denmark has come to a concentration camp without being it.”³² Six months earlier, one of the most respected and integrated Danish politicians of Middle Eastern descent was quoted saying “I’m locked up in an open prison,” as he had “been under constant police protection for twenty years.”³³ Is there perhaps a direct line from here to the official Danish value canon, which includes *hygge* but not democracy? Asked ‘How come?’ by a journalist, senior government minister and canon mastermind Bertel Haarder answered: “The canon is rooted in the citizens’ soul.”³⁴ Still, the former leader of the populist Danish People’s Party loudly proclaims that “Denmark is breaking apart.”³⁵ Even eight years ago, a prominent news editor headlined the same phenomenon “The Danish Disease.”³⁶

The bottom line is: no matter that exclusivity may not have been the intent of Haarder’s culture canon,³⁷ fragmentation has followed in its wake, as is seen in this caption to a recent newspaper article: “Denmark is a country of happiness free of wars and crises since time immemorial. Still, we have gone into a national defense position for fear of internal and external enemies.”³⁸ Dire self-reflections confirm the sense of crisis. “Is the Danes’ unjustified self-aggrandizement finally cracking?” asked an anthropologist rhetorically in summer 2017 while sensing a belated “revolt against our empty self-confidence.”³⁹ Earlier, another academic, from the Danish Institute for Human Rights, pointed to a downturn in social equality, suggesting that Denmark’s traditional reputation as an international leader, the fairytale land, may be unfounded.⁴⁰

Add to this sampling the fact that Denmark in the last twenty years has seen the lowest cancer survival rates in Scandinavia (with no improvement in sight),⁴¹ and that some of her newer literature adds harm to such human and cultural injuries by claiming that Danes do not placidly appreciate peace for the sake of *hygge*, but demand it to digest their food undisturbed.⁴² “God-Damn *hyggeligt!*” as Kenneth Bøgh Andersen calls chapter four of his new prose fiction, *The Heart of Light*, for kids of a divorced couple,⁴³ is quite like the *hygge* with

lit candles and 'noir' that audiences will recall from the famous TV-series, *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*).

If all this seems to augur an onslaught on Danish values, don't forget the number of appreciative voices that I referenced earlier. Some enumerated situations seemed far from *hyggelige*—but perhaps were "far" in such a way as to animate an urge for *hygge*. As for myself, I appreciate much in Danish life and am glad to count myself as a Dane. However, both the lure and challenge before us, and before Danish culture at large, it seems, is to disabuse ourselves/it of the cozy-craze which the *hygge/lykke* synthesis has ignited in recent years. Here much evidence suggests a cliffhanger between forces of fusion and fission, which is an extra tricky balance insofar as both fission and fusion can lead to explosions with unintended consequences. Social trust is diminished by fission, but fusion can harden societal bonds and exclude certain community members. Does the nexus between *hygge* and *lykke* take us closer to a win-win situation and away from a zero-sum game? And further, is *hygge* a pathway to the mental state of *lykke*?

Let me suggest not an answer, but the conditions of possibility for different answers, by referring to an individual whose testimony—itself multilayered—subsumes many of the voices we've now heard. Malahat Shahin, a Copenhagen law student of Afghan descent, wrote a piece for *Politiken* in the summer of 2017 under the headline: "I don't know what to answer when I'm asked if I feel I'm Danish."⁴⁴ Her whole text is as open-ended as its title suggests, and as the caption shows, its open-endedness holds both risks and opportunities: "Why do some people have a very dogmatic take on Danishness? Can't they see that Danishness is dynamic, in constant flux and not simply a firmly defined entity?" Shahin senses a human and societal potential on offer, and so an opportunity—but also the risk that this opportunity may be squandered.

Whether you're an old French-born prince consort or a young Afghan-born law student, you may feel out of place in Denmark. *Lykke* is not a given, and my research makes me wonder if *hygge* helps such Danes to reach it. Will access to the moments of relaxation called *hyggestunder* in Danish facilitate a *lykkelig* outcome, especially for newcomers navigating their adopted nation's culture, or will such moments rather be stones for bread for the hungriest among us?

Endnotes

¹ For comments on the Norwegian version of *hygge/lykke*, see e.g., “Happiness report: Norway is the happiest place on Earth,” BBC, March 20, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-39325206>; Rebecca Lowen, “Why is Norway so happy? Let us count some ways,” *Star Tribune*, March 24, 2017; and Gabby Landsverk, “Hyggelig å møte dege!” *Sun Sailor*, March 9, 2017.

² Pressreader.com lists 142 articles about the identification of Wall’s torso dated between August 22 and 27, 2017.

³ *Minnesota Daily*, September 7, 2017.

⁴ Patrick Kingsley, *How to be Danish: A Journey to the Cultural Heart of Denmark* (New York: Marble Arch Press, 2012/2014), 61-62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 116; Kingsley’s quote is from Richard Jenkins’ book *Being Danish: Paradoxes of Identity in Everyday Life* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 117; quote from Jenkins, 253-54.

⁸ Jenkins, 254.

⁹ Thomas Bredsdorff and Anne-Marie Mai, eds., John Irons, trans., and Klaus Høeck, *100 Danish Poems: From the Medieval Period to the Present Day* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 166-67.

¹⁰ The Danish original quoted from F.J. Billeskov Jansen, ed., *Den danske lyrik 1800-1870: Første halvbind* (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1967), 95; translation is mine.

¹¹ Marie Tourell Søderberg, *Hygge: The Danish Art of Happiness* (London: Michael Joseph/Penguin/Random House, UK, 2016), 206-16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 216.

¹³ Pia Edberg, *The Cozy Life: Rediscover the Joy of the Simple Things Through the Danish Concept of Hygge* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2016), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁵ So long as measurements of this kind are confined to quantifiable matters, and stress may be measurable in this way, they can be helpful, at least to a degree. It’s when the goal of quantification exceeds such limits that the measures may turn misleading. I was recently consulted by two Minnesota researchers who were seriously “hoping to test the repeated claim that Danish well-being is partly due to the country’s embrace of *hygge* by developing a *hygge* scale and assess its association with a validated well-being scale.” My main concern with this project was the basic one that most accounts of *hygge*, including Edberg’s, consider the phenomenon adverse to quantification, and so to begin quantifying it seems a contradiction in terms. In terms of *lykke* and the annual OECD measurements that have put Denmark at the top of the list of happy nations for years (and second, after Norway, in 2017), similar reservations have surfaced. For example, the summary of an article written in 2016 by the anthropologist Inger Sjørsløv

titled “Lykkens sociale liv” (The social life of happiness) reads: “The Danes have once again been named the happiest people in the world, if you believe in that sort of thing. Ethnographers don’t. For they study the different forms of happiness” (*Weekendavisen/Ideer*, March 23, 2016, 10.) A different measurement, called “The Happy Planet Index,” triggers other objections from happiness researchers, as it places Albania near the top of its list. The Danish researcher Christian Bjørnskov also questions the validity of its data collection criteria, cf. Signe Thomsen’s article, “Nyt lykkebarometer sender Danmark langt ned ad listen” (The new *lykke* barometer places Denmark far down on the list), *Politiken*, July 26, 2016, <http://politiken.dk/forbrugogliv/livsstil/art5630366/Nyt-lykkebarometer-sender-Danmark-langt-ned-ad-listen>. Finally, a third Danish happiness researcher, Kjartan Sveistrup Andsbjerg, writing under the heading, “Vi misforstår ofte lykken” (We often misunderstand happiness), addresses two related issues complicating happiness discussions, namely, that happiness is related to economic wealth, but only to a degree. What recent “World Happiness Reports” show is a decline in Danish happiness—along with a greater increase in economic inequality than is experienced in countries normally comparable to Denmark. Thus wealth is important to happiness, but only to a degree and never when it comes at the expense of social relations (*Politiken*, March 25, 2016). As for other pitfalls in the Danish *hygge*-concept, see Bo Lidegaard’s article, “Hemmeligheden er, at dansk hygge ikke kun er for nisser,” which is summarized this way: “Danish hygge has become a mystical concept, whose meaning the rest of the world tries to figure out. It’s hard to explain, for we don’t understand it ourselves. And yet” (*Politiken*, December 25, 2016. <http://politiken.dk/debat/art5760193/Hemmeligheden-er-at-dansk-hygge-ikke-kun-er-for-nisser>).

¹⁶ Jessica Joelle Alexander and Iben Dissing Sandahl, *The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids* (New York: TarcherPerigree Book, 2016), 135.

¹⁷ The examples are from Helen Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World’s Happiest Country* (London: Icon Books, 2015), 200, 230, 245, 273, 277, 327, 344.

¹⁸ Susie Measure, “The Year of Living Danishly by Helen Russell, book review: Scandi life has a long lust list,” *Independent*, January 10, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-year-of-living-danishly-by-helen-russell-book-review-scandi-life-has-a-long-lust-list-9969186.html>.

¹⁹ The examples are culled from *ibid.*, 64-65/71, 149, 252-53, 267, 295-301/311, 248-49/313.

²⁰ Helen Russell interviewed by Maya Rodale in the *Huffpost*, May 20, 2015. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/maya-rodale/the-year-of-living-danishly_b_7313362.html.

²¹ Poul Houe, review of *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia*, by Michael Booth, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, Online

Edition: Summer 2015, <http://www.raintaxi.com/the-almost-nearly-perfect-people-behind-the-myth-of-the-scandinavian-utopia/>.

²² Justin Parkinson, "Hygge: A heart-warming lesson from Denmark," *BBC News Magazine*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34345791>.

²³ Interestingly, on that note, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune's* weatherman Paul Douglas' February 7, 2017 column, "Denmark has it down: A good dose of 'hygge'," was about the Danish way of tackling winter days in strides: "Their advice: Don't be a shut-in. Get outside. Go on walks, make time for friends, share meals, limit screen time and get rid of objects that don't bring joy. Maybe take the initiative with friends and family you've lost touch with. Sounds like good advice to me."

²⁴ Erica Wagner, "Hygge: the secret of Danish happiness," *New Statesman*, August 16, 2016. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/08/hygge-secret-danish-happiness>.

²⁵ Wiking has even written his own book of hygge, *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well*, mentioned in a review by Pernille Stensgaard, "The way we hygger," of an almost identical title, Louisa Thomsen Brits, *The Book of Hygge: The Danish Way of Living Well*; Stensgaard briefly mentions three more texts on the subject: Jonny Jackson and Elias Larsen, *The Art of Hygge: How to Bring Danish Cosiness Into Your Life*; Signe Johansen, *How to Hygge: The Secrets of Nordic Living*; and *Fika & hygge—Comforting cakes and bakes from Scandinavia with love*. (See *Weekendavisen/Bøger*, August 26, 2016).

²⁶ Anna Altman, "The Year of Hygge, the Danish Obsession with Getting Cozy," *New Yorker*, December 18, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-year-of-hygge-the-danish-obsession-with-getting-cozy>. More recently Swedish *lagom* culture along with outdoor living models from Norway make up a Nordic competition to Danish *hygge*-lifestyle publications (cf. *Politiken*, July 4, 2017).

²⁷ An article by Kim Ode, "Minnesotans are getting 'hygge' with simple joys of Danish coziness," *Star Tribune*, January 15, 2017, <http://www.startribune.com/minnesotans-are-getting-hygge-with-simple-joys-of-danish-coziness/410587145/>, is titled (in its print version) "We're trending, thanks to hygge," and subtitled "With our emphasis on comfort and coziness, Minnesotans are in vogue"—perhaps not incidentally, Minnesota has just been declared the happiest state in the US (cf. Brandon Gobel, "5 Happiest States in U.S.," *AARP*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2017/happiest-american-states-for-well-being-fd.html#slide1>)—but Ode's optimistic tone gets moderated slightly toward the end when the *lagom* spirit of *hygge*, speaking to "empathy and consensus," is called into question by an interviewee who wonders if this visceral part of Nordic life might "become outdated." In a different context yet another Brit, formerly ambassador to Denmark, bluntly deems the vision of its *hygge* culture deeply flawed: "The Danes have certainly developed and adapted. They have traveled the world and forged commercial and cultural links in

all corners of it. *But they have never found their way to a synthesis of dissimilar elements, which is what is required for a proper nation. Their unity as a people is in fact due to the emphasis on uniformity.* So this is not ‘both and’ but ‘either or’” (italics mine). A “damning with faint praise”?—wonders Stephen Gadd, whose interview with the ambassador and other Brits can be found in *CPH Post*, Vol. 19, issue 34, December 16 2016 - January 26, 2017, 4. https://issuu.com/cphpost/docs/pdfresizer.com_2016-12-15_09-02.

²⁸ Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (New York: Harper, 2016); cited from my review in *Rain Taxi*, Vol. 22:1 (Spring 2017), 12-13.

²⁹ “Slogans fra hele verden,” *Politiken/Rejsen går til 2017*, December 26, 2016.

³⁰ *Politiken*, March 16, 2017.

³¹ Poul Aarøe Pedersen (about Peter Gundelach), “Han kender danskernes værdier,” *Politiken*, December 12, 2016.

³² Stig Grenov, “Danmark er ved at skrive endnu et sort kapitel i sin historie,” *Politiken*, January 3, 2017.

³³ Hans Mortensen (interview with Naser Khader), “Jeg er indsat i åbent fængsel,” *Weekendavisen/Samfund*, August 5, 2016.

³⁴ Nikolaj Heltoft (interview with Bertel Haarder), “Kanonen har rod i borgernes sjæl,” *Politiken*, December 12, 2016. The same sentiment informs Elisabeth Astrup’s article about the nature of happiness: “Hemmeligheden bag den danske lykke ligger i vores sindelag” (The secret of Danish happiness lies in our mentality), *Politiken*, September 16, 2016. However, as we saw in other contexts earlier, this emphasis on spirituality has an economic and materialistic counterpoint. Right under Astrup’s main print article, she refers to a new happiness measurement that concludes: “De rigeste er mest tilfredse med livet” (The richest people are the most satisfied in life).

³⁵ Cf. the editorial, “Er Danmark ved at knække over?” in *Frederiksborg Amts Avis*, August 15, 2016.

³⁶ Michael Jannerup, “Den danske syge,” *Berlingske Tidende*, February 20, 2009.

³⁷ See Anne Bech-Danielsen’s lengthy interview article with Haarder, “Danmarkskanonen er ikke en vi skal slå udlændinge i hovedet med,” *Politiken/PS*, August 28, 2016.

³⁸ Kim Brinckman, “Forsvarsposition bliver årets sidste ord,” *Politiken*, June 24, 2017.

³⁹ Dennis Nørmark, “Er danskernes ubegrundede selv-overvurdering endelig ved at slå revner?” *Politiken*, August 17, 2017.

⁴⁰ Maria Ventegodt Liisberg, “Det har været et fuldstændig tosset år i ligestillingens eventyrland,” *Politiken*, December 26, 2016.

⁴¹ “Danmark sætter bundrekord i kræft 20 år i træk,” *MXmetroexpress*, January 4, 2017.

Hygge & Lykke: *Good Old Danish Enclosures* | Poul Houe

⁴² Lars Kiilerich Laustsen, "Kan vi SÅ få madro!" *Weekendavisen/Bøger*, April 28, 2017, 10.

⁴³ Kenneth Bøgh Andersen, "Forbandet hyggeligt" (*Lysets hjerte—kapitel 4*), *Weekendavisen/Faktisk*, May 5, 2017, 5.

⁴⁴ Malahat Shahin, "Jeg ved ikke, hvad jeg skal svare, når jeg bliver spurgt, om jeg føler mig dansk," *Politiken*, August 11, 2017.