

**Searching for a Finnish identity**  
**By Päivi Lipponen, PH.D, MBA**  
**Member of the Finnish Parliament**

I explain to my daughter in Istanbul the history of Hagia Sofia. My ten year old daughter interrupts my flood of words: “Mother, who is Allah?” I am astonished and reply: “Haven’t you learned anything at school about the Muslim religion?”

I learned in elementary school the refrain, “Strawberry blueberry-patriotism,”(The Finnish saying:Our country is a blueberry, a Finnish favorit, and all others are strawberries.) In addition to the basics of education the mission of the school is to bring up children to become Finnish citizens.

The image of the ideal Finn was for a long time the independent, hardworking peasant. Finland remained an agricultural society for an exceptionally long time.

Finland and Finnishness have changed greatly within a short time. In my own school classes (she has been a history teacher) or in the schools I went to there were no foreigners and I was living in the capital of Finland. Not one of my friends even traveled abroad.

The world changes faster than its people and their values. Professor Laura Kolbe discusses in her book, *Ihanuuksien Ihmemaa* (The Wonderful Wonderland) the self conception of the Finns: What forms a nation? Kolbe sees that the crises and adversities experienced by a people together over a long history are the social clue. They give the experience of the nation’s glory and honor and common sacrifice. These elements build the shared national inheritance.

What makes me a Finn? If I should name something very Finnish, I would say it is the clothing at the summer cottage. Those old clothes which one does not want to wear in public. Is it cooling off after the sauna on the shore at the summer cottage, hitting the mosquitoes in the blueberry forest or a lonely ski trip in the snowy forest? Those moments in nature make me happy, but does that isolation make me also an *Impivaara*—person (she refers to Aleksis Kivi’s *Seven Brothers* who lived in a forest far away to escape the duties of society for quite a while).

I have wondered why we Finns find it so difficult to think of ourselves as being Europeans. Do we maybe have in our unconsciousness a memory of the first moment, when the Finnish peasant Lalli and the European bishop Henrik met on the ice of the Köyliö lake? The bishop was killed.

The Finns have always been forced to battle either as *hakkapelites* in the Swedish army or they have defended their own country. A hundred wars and a thousand combats have for sure influenced our thinking, customs and the education of our children.

I am proud that we Finns have never taken the role of the victim. Kolbe writes that there is in the emotional world of the Finns no place for a victim.

Finland is a state which was born in the time of strong nationalism. The basis of a state was considered to be the culture, the language and the ethnically defined nation. I believe that these

concepts live deeply in us even today in our values and our behaviors. How does this mindset fit with the modern multicultural Finland and the understanding of Finnishness in the 21st century?

The scientist Lepola asks in his book *From a Foreigner to a Finn* when the immigrant will become a Finn. If the understanding of Finnishness is limited to “us” and “the others” then who is Finnish and who is left outside?

I have a dream that we will be able to build Finland to be a united nation —we can be proud of our own inheritance and at the same time appreciate diversity. The school is the motor of change. Education in our schools should give to youth a Finnish, a European and a world citizen identity so that the young person will become a citizen in her home country and as well become a person able to handle global challenges.

Translated by Kaarina Langeland, edited by Bill Aho