

BY ALEXANDER STUBB

The funny world of Finnish idioms

I have always been a fan of idioms, old sayings, and figures of speech. They say a lot about the language, heritage, and culture of a country. They also reveal how people think.

Take, for example, the fact that Finland is ranked the fifth happiest country in the world, according to the recently released 2017 World Happiness Report. Yet Finns are not known to be the most smiling of people, unless you mention that Finland is four places ahead of Sweden in the rankings. Then

you may crack a smile.

But a close look at Finnish sayings – most of them are

old and should be taken with a grain of salt, as they do not reflect the optimism and international ambition of today's youth – is revealing. They say a lot about the Finnish soul and reflect the fact that our history has not always been a bed of roses.

Many older idioms are hilariously miserable.

Let's start with the "life sucks" category. As an eternal optimist I have always loved *pessimisti ei koskaan pety*, which translates to "the pessimist will never be disappointed." Well, of course not. Play it safe, don't expect that anything good will ever happen, and you won't be disappointed.

That's why it's only natural that we believe "happiness will always end in tears," *itku pitkästä ilosta*. And just to make the point, one of our greatest poets, Eino Leino (1878–1926),

wrote *kel onni on se onnen kätkeköön*, "Whoever is happy should hide it."

And how about setting high aims? Today's motivational literature often talks about setting ambitious goals. A classic expression from Finnish history would disagree: *se joka kuuseen kurkottaa se katajaan kapsahtaa* – "if you reach for the spruce you will fall onto the juniper." In other words, don't go aiming too high, because the higher you go, the harder the fall.

I am glad to say that my teenagers laugh out loud when they hear these sayings.

This is exactly why you should learn a few Finnish sayings before you land. It's a

great topic for small talk, albeit when I did an exchange year in the United States my Swedish-speaking grandmother told me: *att tala är silver, att tiga är guld* – "to speak is silver, to be silent is gold." Not necessarily the best advice for gregarious America.

I do love these idioms, no matter how wonderfully idiotic they sometimes sound. For example, *Ei niin paha ettei jotain hyvääkin*, which roughly translates to "not so bad that there's nothing good in it." In the old days these sayings might have been considered as wisdom. Today? Well, I hope they give you a good laugh. Welcome to Finland! ●

ALEXANDER STUBB, former prime minister of Finland, is one of the 12 expert members of the newly launched international World Happiness Council.

