

The Tales of an Immigrant, Part 1 of N

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1 Introduction

The first question i normally get is, "are you from the U.K.?" or "are you British?" Every time i have to stifle a giggle, because i've heard it so many times that i've come to understand that it is a roundabout way of trying to find out if i'm American while sidestepping the risk of offending me by asking directly.

Hello, my name is stephan beal, born Stephan Glenn Bryant on the 21st of November, 1972 in Sunrise Hospital, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. Shortly afterwards, my mother's husband, Gerald "Gerry" Beal formally adopted me, giving me the family name Beal. In 1983, my brother Gerald (Beal, but not Jr.), my mother and i moved to the small town of Paris, Arkansas. Almost two years later, we moved to Houston, Texas to be with my mother's future (and current) husband, David Pickartz. (For many years, they were the only Pickartz's in the Houston phone book.) It was in Houston where i grew up. Or, as i've come to learn, Houston is where i *started* my growing up. When asked where i come from, i'm as likely to say Houston as i am to say Las Vegas. Depends on who's asking and the context of the question.

On September 5th, 1997, my then-employer, now-extinct Compaq, relocated me to Munich, Germany. When this document started, i was still in Munich, but in the Summer of 2006 i moved to Berlin. My time here in Germany (or, more correctly, outside of my homeland) are what this document is about.

The stories here serve several purposes. One, i simply enjoy writing, and sometimes like to write about non-technical stuff (my profession and main hobby is programming, and i write quite a lot of docs for that). Two, over the years there are questions i've been asked over and over again regarding life outside of my homeland. As i've had time to think more and more about the questions, i can now attempt to answer them more completely than i could in spoken conversation. Three, to attempt to dispell some common myths and stereotypes. Maybe i'll inadvertently plant some new ones, for which i will appologize in advance. Another reason, though perhaps a bit non-conventional, is that so my parents, who have all done nothing less than support and encourage me over the years, can get at least a small look into the life of their eldest son, who moved away over eight years ago and who they hear depressingly little from.

This "book" has no intended structure, no specific plans for content, and no specific target audience. Don't look for a plot - there won't be one. Maybe there are a few lessons in it, but those are for each to recognize for him- or herself. More likely, however, you'll find yourself reading sentence after sentence of blabber. i will try very hard to keep any politically sensitive views out of here, as well. This is not a debating ground, but a story ground, and is not intended to offend anyone's sense of political correctness. While i may very well, in passing, reveal many of my own political and philosophical leanings, we'll try not to harp on them. Those aren't the points of the stories, they are details used to express a point or add contextual information. If a detail bothers you, simply pretend it's not there. You might be amazed at how well the human mind can scare away many common spooks through the power of imagination.

Despite the non-fiction nature of this work, one of its major inspirations has indeed been *fiction*. Since my teenage years i have been an hobby wargamer and collector of boardgames and roleplaying games. In my teenage years i played as many roleplaying games as the next guy did, though i haven't taken part in a roleplaying session in many years. What i still do, however, despite not actually playing roleplaying games, is write material for them. Nothing which ever gets officially published, but some of it gets distributed through an online gaming-discussion/design group of which i am part (<http://countermoves.sourceforge.net>). Over the

years i've written hundreds of pages of material describing *fictional* worlds. Not "fantasy novellas", or anything like that, but *describing* the worlds in which such stories *might take place in*. That is a large part of what goes in to designing worlds for use in roleplaying games or stories of all types - even movies. For example, creating and describing the various cultures and histories. To oversimplify for the sake of the non-gamers, you might say i've written a lot of stuff like, "the Elves live over *here* and the Orcs live over *there*. They don't like each other." Though of course i try to be a bit more colorful in describing these places and events.

Since my teenage years, my friends and family have often encouraged me to write. i have, since 2004, intermittently published articles about computer programming on my web site (<http://s11n.net>), but those are not general-audience material. Due largely to the encouragement of these many people over the years, i've decided to try my hand at writing something which is neither fiction nor entertainment, neither documentary nor autobiography. Not quite sure what it'll become, but it's certainly not like anything i've written before. As Zen says: *eat when hungry, sleep when tired*. In other words: *we'll see what happens*.

1.1 Distribution policy (license)

This document is released into the Public Domain.

Do as you damned well please.

1.2 A very brief introduction to German pronunciation

As i live in Germany, you will likely see a German word or three pop up here and there. Where necessary, i'll translate it. If you're interested in knowing how to say a word, or how it sounds, the German pronunciation rules are quite simple and quite rigid - the only exceptions to the rules are words borrowed from other languages (like the English *job* and French *chance*). While the pronunciation rules are very simple, the overall rules *are not*, and we won't go into German grammar at all unless it's necessary to make a point. The technical name for the "standard" German dialect is Hochdeutsch - "high German" - though the little land of Germany has a surprising number of varying dialects.

The following short guide should get you through most German words. Don't be scared by long German words - they are almost always a compound noun of two or three nouns, like *Gehirnzellschaden* - *brain cell damage*, or *Knopfputzmaschine* - *button-cleaning machine*. In German, nouns are always capitalized, so you can safely know that any capitalized word is a proper name or noun. Unlike English, German has three different words for "the", but the rules involving them are complex and mysterious. Also unlike English, German does not capitalize the proper pronoun "I", which is a part of the reason i don't do it when i write in English (except when quoting another speaker).

Below we compare pronunciations to English. When we say *English*, we mean both *British* and *American* unless specifically noted. My experience with Australian, Scottish, and other dialects isn't as broad. In most cases i am likely to assume, perhaps incorrectly, that those dialects adhere more to Queen's English ("British").

We will often use the abbreviations *DE* or *de* for German/Germany. DE is the ISO two-letter country code for Germany, derived from Germany's native name, Deutschland, and the name of the language, Deutsch. Likewise, we will use *engl* or *en* to abbreviate the generic English.

Disclaimer: though i did learn *some* German in school, the majority has been simply through read/hear-and-repeat. i make *very many* mistakes in the language, so don't ever rely on any German text i write to be an accurate translation unless i'm quoting another source. i can get by with the language, but i'm far from fluent. This experience has taught me a much better appreciation of fluency in *any* language, including my own native tongue.

- **The letter A.** This letter always has a short *ah* sound except when another combination changes it. e.g. *ae* and *ai*.
- **The letter C.** Always has a *K* sound, as in English *cat*. The letters C and K are largely redundant in German. C fills more roles, and could theoretically also take the place of K. Nonetheless, K is quite common.
- **The letter G.** This letter always has a short G sound, like *girl*, not *gee*.
- **The letter I.** Unless part of a diphthong, *i* always has the sound of an English *ee*. Common diphthongs including *ai*, which sounds like it does in English, and *ie* or *ei*, both explained below.

- **The letter J.** As in Spanish, J has a Y sound except in borrowed words, like the English *Job* or *Jeans* (which or capitalized, remember, because it is a noun).
- **The letter O.** Always has a long *oh* sound, as in English *open*.
- **The letter Q.** By itself, it sounds like the German word *Kuh* (engl. *cow*), or English's borrowed *coupe*. In words it normally has a sound similar to a K. It isn't seen often in German, in any case, the only common example coming to mind being *I. Q.*, which is pronounced like *ee-coupe* and has the same meaning as in English.
- **The letter S.** When an individual S has a vowel on either side, or is at the end of a word, it has a Z sound, as in the English *laser* or *dogs*. A double-s, or one leading a word, has the same sound as in English unless another combination changes it (e.g. see *St* and *Sp*, below).
- **The letter U.** Always has a short *oo* sound, except when in unlauded form (see below).
- **The letter V.** Sounds like an English F and the letter's name is pronounced *fov*, as in a dog's bow-wow.
- **The letter W.** Sounds like an English V and the letter's name is pronounced *veh*, as in the stereotypical Jewish exclamation *oy veh* (i'm certain i haven't spelled that right).
- **The letter Y.** This sounds like a short English U, and in fact the letter's name is Upsilon. It is quite uncommon except in borrowed words like *yoyo* and *yacht*.
- **The letter Z.** This sounds like the British letter Z, which American doesn't really have. It's pronounced "tzet", with only a slight "t" at the front.
- **The letter ſ.** Called the "scharfes Ess", or "sharp S", this is simply a double-s. It is always acceptable to use a double-s in its place, and in fact i always do. In spoken language, i believe there is no way to differentiate between the sound of a sharp S and a double-s.
- **Umlauted letters: ä, ü, ö.** Simply mentally translate these to *ae*, *ue*, and *oe*. Those are the accepted written forms for languages without umlauts. In fact, as i use an American English keyboard layout, i always type them using the added 'e'. The umlauted ö actually does, despite my school-year learnings, have an English equivalent, but it is difficult for the English-speaking tongue to isolate: the German ö sounds like the *i* in the English *girl* and *bird*. (Many thanks to Johnny Olsen (a Norwegian, by the way) for that tip.) The sounds are in fact a bit different than their English equivalents, a bit "longer", but these will do for most purposes. The native sounds are difficult for native English speakers to properly use and hear. For example, most non-native speakers can't necessarily tell if the leading e in *Edelweiss* is an *ae* or an *e* without looking up the spelling. The sound of the u-umlaut is especially easy to confuse/mispronounce, being quite similar in sound: *Muellheim* vs. *Mullheim*. Occasionally an umlaut is simply dropped, as in the translation of the native name of Zuerich, to Zurich. Note that occasionally an *ae/ue/oe* combination shows up which is not the equivalent an umlaut, in which case the sound of each letter is made separately. (Can't think of an example at the moment.)
- **-aeu-**. As in *Loewenbraeu* beer. Sounds similar to the *oy* in *joy* and *boy*.
- **-eu-**. Sounds very much like (identical to?) the *aeu* combination: similar to the *oy* in *joy* and *boy*.
- **ie and ei.** These two are much simpler than they look, but easy to confuse: take the *long* sound of the *last* letter in the combination. Thus "ie" has an "ee" sound and "ei" has a long "i" sound. (In fact *Ei* by itself means "egg.") There are cases where a seeming *ie* combination is not really a combination, like *Italien* (Italy), in which case the normal pronunciation rules apply: *EE-tahl-ee-ehn* (though leading EE is not as prevelant as it looks). The spoken difference is minimal for our purposes. For those of you who don't remember the *i/e* guideline in *English*: "*i* before *e* except after *c* and when sounding like *ay* in *neighbor* and *way*." Though that is a guideline, not a rule: weird, eh?
- **ai.** Pronounces like an long *i* in English, or like the British *aye*. For example, the Germanized form of the Americanized form of the Germanic name *Michael* - *Mike* - has a popular German spelling: *Maik*.
- **Pf- or -pf.** Just like they sound in English.
- **Sch- or -sch or -sch-**. These are equivalent to the English *sh* sound. Simply ignore the *c*.

- **-ch** with a preceding vowel. i'm not aware of a direct English equivalent, but it's easy for English-speakers to learn. It's difficult to describe in writing, it would seem. It's almost a soft scratching sound made at the back of the mouth. Pretend you're blowing steam onto a window so you can write on it with your finger, and push *only* the *back* of your tongue up so that it stops about 2/3rds or 3/4ths of the way to the top, a bit forward of the area where the throat and mouth cavity meet. That's approximately the sound you're looking for, though the mouth isn't as wide open as it would be when blowing steam. In fact, the sound is made without having to move the jaw at all, and the mouth only slightly open.
- **St-**. Sounds like *sht*, though the *h* is very slight, so *stop* has an *sh* sound at the front. *Steak*, on the other hand, is a borrowed word and its pronunciation varies with the person saying it: some use the native English some use the German *sht* sound.
- **Sp-**. Like *St-*, this prefix has an *sh* sound in it, so *Sport* sounds like *shport*.

2 Stereotypes

Stereotypes are horrible things. They bind into our minds an association - typically negative - between a person and a set of habits, and that association is often difficult to break once it is in place. Truly horrible, stereotypes are.

But often *extremely* useful.

When i moved here, i had very few preconceptions about what i would encounter. i simply acknowledged that i had no clue whatsoever, and went forward with it. At Compaq, i had had the opportunity to work closely with people from no fewer than 14 different nations. All but a small handful of us were new to Munich, so we had no difficulty forming ourselves into a group, simply out of the age-old animal habit of defense via large numbers.

However, groups of peoples from different cultures behave and work differently from those made up of members from an individual culture. Almost without exception, this is an improvement over conventional single-culture organizations.

For better or for worse, my years of working with "foreigners", of which i am one, has taught me a few stereotypes of my own, which i will briefly describe below. Remember that these are not rules. They do not apply to every individual of any given culture. For example, every single Italian i've met has been a distinctly unique person. But every single one of them has been *Distinctly Italian*. You can almost smell the Italianness, but you don't need to - you always hear it long in advance, as it rounds the corner down the hall from your office. *Ciao, bella!* it cries to the woman at the front desk, irrespective of any factors other than her inherent femininity.

2.1 The Germans

Let's start with the country where i've spent the vast majority of the last eight years...

The Germans, nearly every one of them, are an honest, responsible, forward-thinking people. Maybe that's why fitting in is taking me so long. While i am typically brutally honest, responsibility and forward-thinking/planning are not my strong points. The Germans do it wonderfully, though.

Customer service was, when i moved here, a completely foreign concept. In the mean time it has improved significantly. i like to think it's partly because i've kept my American habits of (a) eating out often and (b) over-tipping. This is something most Europeans don't do, primarily because their cultures do not have the so-called "expendable income" that Americans typically have, by comparison.

Despite the youth of the customer service concept, the German ideals of perfection are old and deep-seated. The vast majority of them take a level of personal responsibility in their work which is unmatched in most English/American cultures. It is no surprise at all that many of the most brilliant mathematicians and engineers of all time have come from Germany - Planck, Einstein, Openheimer, etc. - given the overall German tendency towards detail, perfection, and forward thinking. Process and accountability are highly important to most Germans.

As work colleagues, i particularly admire the honesty and directness of Germans. Even when they know they don't like each other, they swallow their pride, they deal with it, and they continue working together. Occassionally, one will even call the other into a one-to-one meeting to discuss their personal problem. It's happened to me twice, and i have nothing but respect for the guys who have the balls to do it. It demonstrates a level - i almost want to say a strata - of responsibility i've never seen demonstrated by non-German colleagues.

2.2 The Austrians

Though i will probably dismay some Austrians and Germans by saying so, i personally see very little difference in the overall German and Austrian cultures. This is not intended as an insult. Rather, it is to say that i am not personally aware of any particular aspects of Austrian culture which *widely* vary from those of German culture.

They are both German-speaking lands. The dialects are slightly different, but no more different than many dialects within Germany, and far less different than, say, the rough Bavarian dialect (which can almost be described as a proto-language). For example, "I love you" in both German and Austrian is "ich liebe dich", whereas in Bavarian it is "i mog di," which is more like a bastardized version of the Hochdeutsch, "ich mag dich", which is roughly equivalent to "I *like* you, but I'm not quite ready to commit just yet."

2.3 The Italians

i've had a lot of contact with Italians, beginning even before i moved here. Luca Di Fiore, a man without social peer, was the one to introduce me to the most extreme, most central aspect of Italian nature: make sure everyone around is happy. Luca, his brother Pietro, the outrageous Fabio Picciani, the man known only as Daniel, and many others have, on every occasion in which i've seen them, exuded some form of "feel good energy", even when they're feeling down.

When a social gathering is called for by an Italian, it is almost a given that far more many people than expected will show up. The reason i go to Luca's and Pietro's shindigs is because i like to count how many people come. The numbers boggle the mind. The ratio of men to women boggles the mind! Non-Italians appear to be incapable of achieving these ratios.

The Italian women seemed to be fairly well locked up - i can't say i've known too many of them. A related story, though:

Shortly after i moved to Germany, i was on the street next to the Deutsches Museum, the largest technical museum in the world. Nearby was a group of 5 or 6 Italian men and one of their rare female specimens. The men chatted away non-stop. All of them. Continually. This seemed to pose no problem for anyone. *Then* the woman opened her mouth to speak. Before the first syllable came out, the males were silent. *Perfectly* silent. She cooed out something or other - a sentence or two. The men all laughed convincingly, some even holding their bellies. After a couple seconds *and in unison*, they *all* began chatting away again.

This would come to be typical of my interactions with Italians. Such behaviour might normally agitate, but coming from an Italian it's just somehow funny and cute.

While Luca is an exceptional example of the stereotypes of Italians, and indeed he does consciously play the role, the following story will give you an idea of how easily the Italians tend to fit in wherever they go.

A few months before we were all to move to Munich, the group of us who was to move gathered in Houston for several months so we could start working together, planning out what we would need to do, figure out which skills we would need to take with us, and learn them. During that time, i or someone else would often take Luca out to local restaurants or clubs. i've never once seen Luca touch a drink, and he has a story to explain that, but that doesn't stop the man from partying with the hardiest of them. After about two weeks in Houston, Luca took me to a club someone had introduced him to. At the door we stood in line, the door man checking everyone's I.D. for proof of age. We could hear him as he looked at each face, then the driver's license, then back to the face, "okay, you can go in." It was the same routine for me - showed him my license. Rather than go in, i turned to wait for Luca. The doorman turned at the same time, smiled brightly, raised his hand in a grateful "we come in peace" pose, and shouted, "Hey, Luca!" Never did look at his passport.

Similar episodes happen everywhere Luca goes. If he's in your home town for more than 24 hours, he probably knows one or more members of your extended family. He just might have "made them an offer they couldn't refuse," as he's so fond of saying.

2.4 The Spaniards

In my experience, the Spaniards are very much like the Italians, with a slightly more chaotic bent. Not chaotic in the sense of immoral or evil, but in the sense of less organized. They greatly value their sunshine, afternoon *ciestas*, and the simple comforts of life, and normally place those above more modernist goals like careerism and convenient shopping hours.

Much to my surprise, a completely non-Spanish speaker can hear many differences between Mexican Spanish and the native Spanish dialect(s). Normally non-speakers of a language cannot tell whether two speakers are using different dialects, as long as the overall sound of the dialects are similar enough. As an extreme example, let's take a speaker from Ozark, Arkansas, and one from a small village in Scotland. They won't understand a word each other says, but many non-English speakers also won't be able to tell that the speakers are using different dialects. While both very different dialects, their overall sound is quite similar.

To an American, who probably grows up hearing Mexican Spanish, Iberian Spanish sounds almost like a Hispanic with a lisp. For example, the Mexican-sounding *ser-veh-sa* (beer) sounds like *ser-veh-tha* in Spanish.

Nearly seven years ago I started dating a German girl named Sabine. (We'll certainly hear more about her later.) Her mother, Martha, is a native Spaniard, and I've traveled with them to Spain a couple times. Sabina and I split up over five years ago, but Martha and I are still close. Without her continued love and support over the years, Germany certainly would have killed me by now. It is interesting to see the effects of the very different German and Spanish cultures on Sabine and her siblings, Hannes and Isabel. Such internal conflicts, as it were, are often expressed very distinctly, leaving no doubts as to where their origins lie.

Related side-note:

The sister (Cheyenne) of the cat that lives with me (Denver) lives with Martha. She adopted Cheyenne when Sabine and I moved into a flat which proved to be too small for both of the cats, especially the rowdier Cheyenne. Denver, when she's feeling crowded and stressed, gets *diarrhea*. Diarrhea in and of itself is ugly but tolerable. A *cat* with diarrhea is something different - they *spray* it. It's not just ugly, but *messy*. So Cheyenne went off to live with Granny, and I still see her there from time to time.

Given Martha's family's continued influence in my life, my preconception of Spaniards is normally swayed in a positive direction.

2.5 The Swiss

The Swiss are such a variant people, and I do not know enough about them as a collective to tell you much. Their nation has five official languages: German, French, Romanian, Italian, and English. The country name's abbreviation, CH, is from the Latin name for the country: *Confederation Helvetica*. Their currency is the colorful Swiss Franc. Historically they are politically neutral, and one of the relatively few European-area countries which is not a member of the E.U. and does not use the Euro currency.

My trips to the Schweiz have been limited to the area around Zurich and along the train line between Munich and there. Postcards and other pictures of Switzerland do the land no justice. None whatsoever. It's stunning.

The city folk are as modern and up-to-date as anywhere else. The raw essence of money flowing through Zurich can be seen all throughout the city. It is a rich, beautiful, and ancient city. Any given one of those is alluring, and all three together are downright enchanting. Despite its ancientness, the vast underground shopping center under the main train station is an undeniable sign of extensive modernization.

While the Zurichers speak German, it is an odd dialect, much more sing-songy and nasal than Hochdeutsch. When speaking with Swiss, I am sometimes mistaken for a German, though any German or Austrian can immediately spot me as an English speaker. Native Germans and Austrians often have difficulty with Swiss dialects as well. Like Scotsmen speaking to Americans, however, the Swiss can tone down their dialect in order to deal with the outside world. Or they just switch to English. While their German always retains the nasal/sing-songiness to some degree, English-speaking Swiss often have little or no discernible accent. This phenomenon is also common amongst people who have lived in several different countries for significant amounts of time, and is presumably so prominent in the Swiss because of their exposure to so many, and widely varying, languages. While Romanian and Italian are remarkably similar - often difficult for non-speakers to differentiate - their other languages are sufficiently different to shape their cross-language accents in unusual ways.

2.6 The Brits

My teachers and mamma always said, "if you ain't got nothing nice to say, then don't say it."

i've met a few really wonderful Brits. But that's one of the few nice things i can say. (Jerry, you're certainly on the list. No, not the shit-list.)

All statements made below must be qualified with: my experience with Brits is limited to a competitive corporate work environment, one out-of-element romantic relationship, and a six-month stay with a British roommate who'd been on social support for years, "unable to work, due to a psychosis" which somehow disappeared every Friday night and came back early Monday mornings.

Politics, primarily, is the reason for my distaste of native Britons - the personal politics they bring into every relationship with everyone they know. Nothing is as it seems, and everyone's out to win some personal game with undeclared rules, but which each Brit firm believes is his or her birthright. It's almost like American relationships, except that Brits have proven themselves to *actually have*, or at least be able to simulate, a complex set of underlying rules with some concrete goal at the end. But don't ask, because they're not telling.

The males who aren't trying to become brilliant tacticians are often as equally brutish, or at least as blunt, as their brethren are cunning. Females are subtly different in the expression of their self-devotion, normally more cat-like and refined than males, but nonetheless just as driven and self-centered.

One of the thing i do admire about many Brits is their command of their language. Admittedly, they *need* to command it well to manipulate as well as they do, but it is admirable nonetheless. Tony Blair, for example - i genuinely enjoy watching him speak because he does exactly what a politician's most important personal task is: make people feel confident. No matter what the man says, you normally walk away feeling good about it, even though you may be consciously aware that he probably provided no concrete details. Don't forget that the details are left to the people who work for him - let him do the people-swaying part of the job, because he does it well. i remember, in particular, one interview with him at the White House shortly after 9/11. A reporter asked him something to the effect of, "will you support America in [the war against terrorism]" (though i don't remember if that term had surfaced yet). His answer was nothing short of elegance pure: "... yadda yadda yadda Solidarity yadda yadda yadda Solidarity." Without having uttered a single *yes* or *no*, he pulled off a very difficult feat of political suave, and did so without the reporter (or *any* reporter) reminding him, "but you didn't answer the question," as i did to the TV screen in front of me at the time. The man also has an admirable amount of balls: during a debate/presentation he once made the impassioned statement that England would continue to assist America, "*not* because we are America's poodle, but because it is the right thing to do." A truly classic political quotation which few speakers could have presented as convincingly as he did, despite the roughness of his choice of metaphor.

2.7 The Scotts

Like the Brits, the Scotts are a wide mix, from the cunning to the brutish. While i find the Scottish dialect pleasant, in its purer forms i can't understand a word of it. *Naw' wohn bloody wurd!*

Dougie MacLean's folk music is a must for anyone who just wants to "listen" to Scottish history and culture for a while. It doesn't have any (or many) bagpipes, though.

Billy Connaly, a popular standup comedian, is interesting for those wanting to become more familiar with the Scottish dialect - his is understandable enough that non-Scotts can follow along. i never did know what a "pram" was until watching him, at which point a long-held, deep-seated memory from Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail* suddenly made sense: "I had to push the *pram-a-lot!*" (Used as a rhyme for King Arthur's *Camelot*.)

The majority of the most daring individuals i have known have all come from Scotland, or very close by. Every Scottish male i have ever met can drink no less than six Mass - that's six *liters* - of beer and still walk on his own two feet - or four, depending on how he sees it. *Without puking*. Ex-colleagues Tony Adair and John Cassidy were both once witnessed downing eight liters of beer before contuing to the next party. *And then to work the next day - on time - perfectly fit!*

In Franklin, North Carolina, there's a Scottish Museum where i once bought a memorable bumper sticker: *England forever! (And Scotland a wee bit longer!)*

2.8 The Eires

The folk from Ireland are similar to the Brits and the Scotts, but would appear to be significantly tamer. My judgement is based on the few Eires i've met, however. Most would seem to stay in their homeland, or at least away from Germany.

The Eires i've met have been your average folk, comparable to a mix of British, Scottish and American. Like the Americans, they take for granted their freedom of expression, and most will not hesitate to enter conflicting views or arguments into a conversation, regardless of any potential social consequences.

If you've never seen *Father Ted*, a brief-running Irish comedy series set on the island of Craggy Rock, it's a must. It will dispell most myths regarding "British humor." Unfortunately, the main actor in the series died at an early age, and the show was cancelled before it became well-known.

The Irish dialect is *lovely*, my own personal favourite of the English dialects. There's this Irish newscastress on CNN... grrrrrrr.

Their names are cool, in any case. We once had a colleague with the enviable name of Sinead Shields. Made her sound like a superhero. While she was no doubt an effective worker in and of herself, i'm quite certain the imagery of her name had an additional, subtle and positive, affect on most of us who worked with her.

2.9 The Dutch

My most memorable impression of the Dutch is their English dialect. It's always identical.

The Dutch, in my experience, are your average, moderate Europeans, much like the Danes, less competitive - i almost want to say more humble - than the Germans.

Their language is superficially similar to German, and if you can read German you can pick up a lot of written Dutch. The pronunciations are quite different, however, so it's not as easy to understand if you're listening through a German filter.

Though marijuana is "tolerated" (*it is not legal*) in their country, they are not a land full of potheads. It *might* explain why they all seem to be so easy-going, though.

2.10 The Danes

My experience with Danes is limited to two colleagues who couldn't have been more different from each other. Thus i can't say much here. If i hadn't known they were Danes, i would have thought they were Dutch, Swedish, or Norwegian.

2.11 The Norwegians

One of my dearest friends in the world, Hakon Tjaum (i've left out a Norwegian accented letter there), has taught me most of what i know about Norwegians. Johnny Olsen has helped to act as a counter-balance.

Like the Germans, Norwegians are straightforward, responsible, hard-working people who relax as hard as they work. Most are masters of several languages, and this seems to give them a mental edge which two-and-fewer-tounges people will never be able to grasp. Hakon himself can get by in five different languages. He's a *polyglot*, and it's utterly sick that a non-native English speaker had to teach me the meaning of that word.

Norwegians, like most cultures from northern countries, rarely miss a chance to sit out in the sun when dares shine up there.

While Norwegians in general can drink most Americans under the table, their livers can't quite keep up with those of the Scotsmen. A visiting friend of Hakon's, named Dag, once passed out on the bathroom floor at Hakon's place after a few beers. Scared the hell out of us, that did. Puked all over Hakon's bedroom floor, too, not one second *before* i got the bucket in place.

i once met a Norwegian named Odd (no joke) who made an oft-quoted comment comparing the coffee in our American office to European coffee: "This isn't coffee. It's hot, brown water."

2.12 The Swedes

The Swedes would appear to be the typical, moderate Europeans, alongside the Danes, the Finns, and the Dutch. By and large, they are lovely people, if a bit reclusive or introverted. Their language is, in my opinion, the prettiest of the European languages, alongside Norwegian and, in some dialects, Swiss German.

Like the Norwegians, the Swedes are normally speakers of three or more languages, often at native levels. Thus, like the Norwegians, the Swedes are almost always exceedingly clever. Can't say that i've ever met a stupid Swede.

2.13 The Finns

The neighbors of the Swedes, you don't meet too many of these without visiting Finland. When i think of Finns, i normally associate them with Swedes. This is probably because in my experience, so many Finns speak Swedish and vice versa.

Like the other Scandinavians, the Finns often master three or more languages. The ones i have met have all been remarkably calm people, well in control of the nerves.

2.14 The Turks

For four years i worked right across the street from Munich's Hauptbahnhof. (In Germany, Austrian and Switzerland, every city's main station is called Hauptbahnhof, and it means "main train station.") In that area of town, the population is reportedly over 70% Turkish, so i've been around a lot of Turks in my time here, and eaten absolutely absurd amounts of Turkish Doeners and Duerueuems (or however it's spelled). Good stuff, those are.

Bavaria is a country which i have often summarized as, "the Texas of Germany." In the case of the Turks, this is very much the case. The social relationship between the Turks and the Germans is very similar to that of the Mexicans and the southern states of the U.S. That is to say, they are effectively "the tolerated lower class of immigrant workers." This is highly unfortunate for them, especially considering that so many of them were born and raised here in Germany. It is, however, an accurate summary of their current overall social position *within Germany*. i cannot personally comment on their native culture - i have never traveled to Turkey.

As far as personal acquaintances go, the Turks i've known have ranged the personality scales as much as any Americans i've ever known. From the graceful and beautiful to the brutish and crude. That goes as equally for the women as for the men. One particular Turk i feel compelled to point out is my esteemed young colleague Tarik-Emre Uzer, an ambitious young man who will certainly end up in upper management someday. But he won't read this because he's scared of learning English.

2.15 The French

As an American, i guess i'm supposed to have a predisposition for disliking the French. To be honest, for a long time i did. In my time in Germany i've known many Frenchmen/woman, however. Without exception, each one has been a truly unique individual... while still being *Distinctly French*. What seems to characterize the French the most is their self confidence. Whatever the problem, most Frenchman are certain they know, or can find, the best solution. i won't imply that they are arrogant, but their confidence is noticeable. Indeed, i've never seen a reason to doubt their confidence, except for maybe that little French general guy who tried to conquer the world some years ago.

As notable as their confidence is their friendliness and openness.

Much like in the U.S., the well-being of the individual is paramount in political matters, and France is often in the news because someone is striking for yet a shorter work week. While the politics and news certainly give an impression of a lazy folk, every Frenchmen i've ever known has been a dedicated and effective worker and colleague.

A few years ago i made a short trip to Paris, scared as hell that their "well known" hatred of Americans would lead to an unpleasant few days. Much to my surprise, aside from a harrowing experience at the airport on the return trip, it was nothing but pleasant. The people were helpful and accommodating, the service was certainly adequate, *and the women do shave*. i had the unique opportunity of being there a few days before most of

Europe switched to the common Euro currency, and so was amongst the last of the tourist to smuggle out a few of the colorful French franc notes.

Though i can't personally describe Paris as a *beautiful* city in and of itself, it does have its attractions. Like many large cities, though, automobile traffic and smog unfortunately intrude all too much on what the city has to offer.

There was a Frenchman, a German, and an American sitting at a bar...

Been there. Done that.

2.16 The Americans

It wouldn't be fair to stereotype most of Europe and leave out the Americans. However, it also wouldn't be fair to the Europeans if i now go into a much more detailed description of what i feel are the highs and lows of American culture. So i'll abbreviate and mention only a few points in vague detail...

American culture is, by far, one of overflow. Moderation is not a word the American culture has adopted, at least not when it comes to personal comforts and vocal volume levels. Most Americans are truly friendly people, but in my experience they seldomly bind the types of longer-lasting friendships which Europeans more typically do. "Personal space", a word for which i cannot even think of a common German equivalent, is very important for Americans, as is the freedom to drive where they want, when they want. While most enjoy their stays in Europe, they are normally equally happy to return to their homeland, where they can order from well-understood menus again, bathe in a full-length bath tub, and buy milk by the gallon instead of by the liter. Not that that's all bad, but by comparison with Europe it is a culture of abundance, and this is the source of no small amount of both envy and jealousy in the world.

All that said, i also feel it is undeniable that America drives the invention of new technologies more than any other country. As a huge fan of technology, in nearly all its forms, i hold America in high praise in this regard. Also, as a physical source of geographic wonders and variety, America is a must-see. The Grand Canyon might only be a hole in the ground, but it's a *really big* hole, unlike any other hole on the surface of our planet.

It might be interesting to briefly demonstrate the reputation of Americans from the perspective of a Welshman:

In the early summer of 2004, my Welsh friend Richard married his long-time German partner Angela. Many of Richard's family members flew over from Wales for the event, and Angela had no small number of family there as well. The church was a quaint little building on the edge of a farming community an hour or so by car from Munich, not more than two hundred meters from where Angela's family lives. The ceremony was fairly typical, dragging on and on, nearly endlessly, but one dare not show any sign of impatience or restlessness. i was extremely happy for them, and certainly didn't want to be a party pooper on such an important day for them. But my mind did wander... i noticed, for example, that as the end drew near, the priest wasn't getting to the most important part: the kiss. Indeed! The priest pronounced them man and wife and did not say, "you may now kiss the bride." Richard and Angela, aware that they were now formally married, turned and started to walk down towards the guests. Now, i'm not a huge fan of tradition, but this could not be tolerated. i cupped my hands to my mouth and shouted, "kiss her, you fool!" This got a chuckle from the crowd, but more importantly it got a kiss out of Richard. The wedding was saved.

During the party/mingling phase afterwards, an extremely tall Welshman came up to me, introduced himself, and asked if i was American. "Yes," but a bit confused, i continued, "but my accent gives that away, doesn't it?" His answer, i'll never forget: "It wasn't your accent, it was the fact that you had enough balls to yell 'kiss her, you fool' during the ceremony." He did agree, however, that it needed doing. Richard himself admitted that in his nervousness he had forgotten, and was thankful for the reminder.

So, it would appear that our reputation precedes us.

2.17 The Others

Many European, E.U., or otherwise near-europe countries aren't mentioned above. Places where i haven't traveled, or from which i haven't known at least a few natives, aren't listed. It wouldn't be fair to comment on them. Some examples include Portugal, Greece, and most of the Eastern Block countries. While i have been to Prague and Malta, for example, my stays were too short to really comment on anything more than a couple tourist attractions.

2.18 English vs. The World

The majority of Europeans know at least two languages, and often three or more. I've met Europeans who speak English so well, I mistook them for native Brits or even Americans. It's embarrassing and humbling, knowing that I know only one and a half languages.

When traveling in Europe, one can almost always use English to get around. This is particularly true in areas where lots of tourists travel. Even in non-tourist areas, anywhere tourists are likely to pass through, someone is bound to know some English. However, it normally makes a good impression when making an attempt in the local language before falling back to English. Unlike my experiences in the U.S., not knowing a local language in Europe normally poses no significant hurdle when it comes to basics like getting food, accommodations, and getting around town. In the U.S., on the other hand, someone is just as likely to be turned away if they can't express themselves in English.

It might be interesting to note that the English-native countries as a whole fall into an elite category: in these countries a second (or third...) language is quite uncommon. Why this is and what side effects this has on the cultures, we can only speculate. And we probably will, but not here.

I once took a tour through the castle in Salzburg, Austria. The young woman leading the tour waited for the group to assemble at the assigned time, then explained how to use the sound-playback devices we would use to hear the information about each exhibit. She gave her spiel first in English, then in German. Then in Spanish, followed by French. Then she asked, in English, "do we have any Russians in the group?" That poor girl speaks at least five languages and gets paid minimum wage to shuttle people through a building and explain to them which of two or three buttons to press. Where's the justice in that?

While working at Compaq, I once walked into a room where our two Finnish colleagues, Ossi and Mykka, were discussing something amongst themselves. As I patiently waited my turn, I soon realized that I *understood* what they were saying. They were speaking English, Ossi explaining to Mykka how to get to Ikea by car. "Stop! Wait!" I rudely interrupted them. "Why are you two speaking *English*? That's *wrong*! *Finnish* is your native language!" It truly did bug me, at the time, that the two of them didn't use their native language to communicate amongst themselves. As it was, though, they were simply in the habit of speaking English because that was the language that our 14-nation team used. As I've become more comfortable with German, I've come to understand why they didn't feel compelled to switch languages.

3 Language

Growing up in the U.S., I learned and heard only one language. As I understand it, Spanish has become much more prevalent since I left the States, but when I lived there Spanish was still not in common usage. Spanish-speaking Hispanics were common, but the single-language U.S. culture has not been quick to integrate the languages of its neighboring country. Thus, most Hispanics were literally forced to use English if they wanted to accomplish anything in the States. Houston had a couple Spanish radio stations, as I recall, and the cable networks had one Spanish-speaking channel, but that's not terribly much for a Spanish-speaking population the size of which lives in Houston.

Many large American cities have districts like Chinatown, Little Saigon, and the like, where even the street signs are not in English. Even in those "extreme" cases, the influence of the languages is restricted to the areas immediately around those districts. They do not overflow into the general community. I can only characterize that as unfortunate. We miss out completely on the mental benefits of immersion in another culture and language.

As with all other children in my school system, I had to take at least two years of a foreign language. That's not really enough to learn more than the basics, but it does at least make one firmly aware of different languages. However, in such a short time a foreign language is still that - very foreign.

I ended up taking three years of German - still not much - which then went unused for seven years. That meant that when I got to Germany, I knew enough German to be *perpetually confused*. I knew, for example, only one meaning for each of the few words I knew, instead of the multiple meanings which many words have. Slang was completely incomprehensible. In a way, this was wonderful. Ignorance is bliss, and when you can't read the news then nobody's getting stabbed or shot in your neighborhood, no floods are consuming cities, and you foresee no tax increases in the immediate future. Life is good when you keep yourself ignorant. But at some point you learn enough of the language to understand day-to-day life, and are forced to try to grow up and be an adult all over again. For me, that point was when I started dating Sabine. She and I used English, but her mother doesn't speak English, so each Sunday I had to practice my German with her over dinner. It wasn't

until the past year (2004-2005) that i've been forced to use German on a regular basis at work, so my command of the language is still way behind what it could be for someone who's been here so long. i understand it almost, but not quite, fluently, but i still can't always express what i'd like to, for lack of mastery of the vocabulary and rules. Then again, i've met people who've been here 20 years and can't speak it worth a damn. German is a difficult language, with numerous and precise rules, many of which most non-native speakers violate in small ways in any given sentence. Luckily, the Germans are extremely tolerant of those who obviously make an effort to learn the language.

Living abroad is a life experience which affects an individual in profound and unforeseeable ways. For example, i've learned more about the English language living here than i ever did when i could simply use it at a native level with everyone around me. When you've got to think hard about getting even simple points across to people who don't have a good grasp of your language, you learn to spot ambiguities, slang, and other types of constructs which non-native speakers are unlikely to know. You learn not enunciate and speak more slowly, not blur your words and speak as fast as you can. My mother always did complain that i mumbled, but i think she'd be glad to know that my ability to speak clearly has improved notably since i've been here.

Not only does your usage of simple constructs improve, but your ability to express more complex constructs improves, as does your sense of precision when selecting your words. That, in turn, helps to understand the non-native language better. i can only assume that people who learn 3+ languages get even more benefits across *all* of the languages they know. i'm envious.

It sounds impossible, from the perspective of the single-language mind, but it is a fact that some languages are simply better at expressing certain things. For example, when reading about technical topics i'm as likely to prefer German text, even though i read it much more slowly than English, simply because i find that it more accurately expresses mathematical and technical material. Ambiguities are more difficult to accidentally express in German, which probably also accounts for its relative lack of pun-based humor when compared to "more flexible" languages like English.

One of my favourite examples of words which German has and English does not - though this has nothing to do with mathematics - is *krankschreiben*. This is what a doctor does when he writes a note saying you are not to go to work due to health reasons (ill, injured, whatever). To "write you off sick," is about as concisely as i can express that in English. English has no word for this, nor does Spanish... here's a short side-story about Spanish, in fact directly related to *krankschreiben*...

A few summers ago, Martha, the mother of my ex-girlfriend Sabine, was speaking in Spanish to the American girlfriend of a friend of Hannes (Sabine's older brother). The American girl had lived for some time in Spain and apparently spoke the language quite well. She had moved to Germany to be with her boyfriend, and had also picked up an impressive amount of German in her short stay. Martha and she chattered back and forth incomprehensibly, in a conversation which went something like this:

... *blahblah blah blah blahblahblah krankgeschrieben blah blah blahblah...*

Surprised, i interrupted them and asked, "does Spanish not have that word, either?" Sure enough, it doesn't. Both speakers, however, simply accommodated by briefly borrowing the German word. Problem solved in an elegant fashion.

(Note that the word in their sentence is different from what i wrote above: they used the *past tense* of the verb, whereas i wrote the base form. Yes, the swapping of the *ei/ie* pairs is correct here.)

3.1 Body language

There are few things more frustrating than trying to get or receive directions over the phone in a language you don't understand very well.

One of life's more interesting lessons has been learning the value of *body language*.

The ability to *point* at the subject of a sentence, or simply to hold one's arms apart as if to say, "*this* big," are *powerful* expressive capabilities. Unfortunately, we don't realize this until some event forces us to give up any reliance on body language. This can happen for a number of reasons: we are blinded or dealing with the blind, or even something as mundane as talking on the phone in a language which is not native to us.

Once we become aware of the *value* of body language (or *Mimic*, as the Germans call it), we can use this to help ourselves communicate better. An staggering large number of concepts can be communicated without verbal language, even between people who have no training with hand-signing or other formal forms of non-verbal

communication. Conversely, *amazingly few* concepts can be conveyed in pure written or spoken form - *without* imagery such as body language - when one doesn't understand the language.

There's lots more to say here...

3.2 Translation vs. Interpretation

In the summer of 2004 i did something i had never done before - quit my job, didn't look for work, and just vegged. i had enough in the bank to keep me going for a while, and in my line of work one doesn't have to be unemployed if he doesn't want to be, so i had no concerns about finding work when i needed it again.

During that time i watched a lot of T.V. Aside from the *Gilmore Girls*, i tended to watch a lot of the only English channel my roommate and i had - CNN. The CNN we see here is not the one you see in America, but it's fundamentally still CNN. i personally prefer the European programming over the American, but that's just a matter of tastes.

In any case, between the German news programming and CNN, i ended up seeing a lot of politics-oriented programming. An inherently vital, but very underestimated and often unnoticed, part of international politics are the professional translators and interpreters who convey what the King Ruler of Abdabua just said to the Prime Minister of Australia.

They have an extremely difficult job. Translating native-level speech in real-time is nowhere near as simple as it may first appear.

More significantly, *interpreting* in real-time is at least as difficult as *translating* in real-time.

What is the difference between interpretation and translation? Let's demonstrate with an example. Let's say you are the Absolute Rule of Bananaland, on a political mission (of peace, of course) to my home country of Grapeland, of which i am coincidentally the current president. You don't speak Grapish, nor i Bananish, so we have to rely on intermediary translators. i hope they are skilled *interpreters* as well. At some point in the conversation your biological needs overwhelm your patience, and you ask (or so my translator says):

"Can you show me to the little boys?"

Slightly abashed by your request, i explain that such activity is illegal in Grapeland.

Alternately, if i take the time to think before speaking, i might ask the translator to clarify what you mean by that:

"He would like to know where the toilet is."

Aha! No problem - that's *certainly* not illegal in Grapeland.

The primary difference between interpretation and translation is that interpretation often implies a more detailed analysis of the underlying meaning than a translation does. Computers, for example, can translate text very quickly and quite accurately, but they're not good at *interpreting* - what do the words *mean*. Humans, on the other hand, have this analytical ability built-in. It is unfortunate that we don't yet know *how* we do it, so we can't teach computers how to do it as well as we can. Once we can achieve that, we can create the ever-popular sci-fi gadget, the portable translator. But let's hope it interprets as well as translates.

3.3 Humor

An interesting aspect of cross-language culture is that humor often doesn't translate. Certain types of humor, more specifically, often simply cannot be carried over from one language to another. Most specifically, pun-based humor has this property. If we consider what puns are it is easy to see why this is so...

Punning is a type of humor based on word-play. This takes the forms of rhymes, "false-friends" (words which sound alike but have different meanings), and other such tricks. Probably the simplest pun in the English language is, "you're a punny [funny] guy!"

Languages often differ enough that a pun cannot be translated. On occasion i see a film in both English and German, and often find that they have to completely replace certain passages of the text for this, or a similar, reason.

To give one example of a clever German pun i once saw in an advertisement. Written in big, bright red, orange, and yellow colors:

FEIERALARM!

Feier means "celebration", and you know what *alarm* means. The German word *Feuer* means *fire*, so one would expect to see *FEUERALARMA* instead. In this particular case they went one step further: they have the advantage that the German word *Feier* sounds just like the English word *fire*. So this one's even a multi-language pun.

It was touching to see, a few days later, a new poster covering the *Feieralarm*, declaring that "as a demonstration of solidarity" following the then-recent catastrophe in New York City, the celebration had been cancelled. (Long dormant, but not unknown, the word "solidarity" entered common usage in *all* languages at that time, not just in English.)

The absolute most clever pun i have ever seen was a German political poster calling for equal rights for homosexuals. The poster said:

Die Gruenen. Wir machen es gleich.

In the photo below it posed three presumably homosexual/bisexual couples, all topless, holding hands or otherwise standing in close contact, and all with sly looks in their eyes (but all looking at the camera).

Now let's look at how clever that pun really is. It's a *whopper* of a pun.

First, "die Gruenen" is the name of a political party (the Greens). German culture normally associates colors with political parties, much like the Americans associate an animal (an elephant or donkey) with theirs. For example, the phrase "red-green politics" actually means something to the natives here.

Now, in the context of the Green Party and the picture on the poster, "wir machen es gleich" has, in this context, *at least* the following interpretations:

1. We [are providing/stand for] [equal rights/equality].
2. We're going to "do it" [soon or now]! ["Do it" meaning either a sex or political activism.]
3. We're "making it" [the same or now]. [Almost the same as #2, but softer language.]
4. We're "doing it" the same. [A dual-pun: a) *Same*-sex - partnerships
b) Homosexuals partner up "the *same* as" heteros do.]

The puns relies on multiple meanings of *machen* (to make or to do) and *gleich* (same, soon, next, now, or immediately). It also relies on the fact that "we" refers to two distinct parties here - the Green Party and non-heterosexuals in general - and yet both still makes sense in the context of *wir maches es gleich*.

i didn't realize two of those meanings until writing this, and it wouldn't surprise me if the original author didn't intend more than the first two.

3.4 Spelling

You may have noticed that my spellings, in English, are sometimes inconsistent. For example, where British and English differ on an ou-vs-o, i often - but not always - take the *ou* variant: *favourite* instead of *favorite*. This was, believe it or not, not a conscious choice, but an interesting side-effect of the way the human mind learns...

The first few years i lived here i read absurd amounts of English fiction. The vast majority of the books came through England, and American books which are sold in England are normally "translated" to Queen's English. For example, *armor* becomes *armour*. Over a period of a few years, i had read so much Terry Pratchett (a native Brit) and "translated" American books, that the habit simply seeped in without me realising it. One day while writing an email, i suddenly realized that i had written *favourite* with an *ou*. Curiously, armor i still write without the *u*, but this is almost certainly because i have been a hobby wargamer since my childhood, and "armor" is a word i consequently read and write very often. Some words i don't spell consistently, and i appologize for this. A fairly proficient typist, i simply let my fingers do the talking and sometimes they'll chose to write *realise* instead of *realize*, as they quite unconsciously did a couple sentences back. i don't feel compelled to "correct" the spellings, however, as the variants are each legal in at least one of the formal English dialects.

3.5 Getting over *slang*

Some years ago i was an addict of a card game called *Magic: The Gathering*. As a game collector and hobby game designer since my teens, i found Magic especially captivating because it literally taught the gaming industry the value of *precise definitions*. Its rules system made abusing the system extremely difficult to do, and was based around very clear definitions of a small set of core terms - probably 10 or 15 terms in all. As a hobby game designer, this aspect of *Magic* particularly caught my attention. As it turns out, however, this lesson goes much further than a silly little card game: it can teach us to be more effective communicators...

When we hear the phrase, "precise definition," we might think of mathematicians or lawyers. That's absolutely correct - a large part of those professions is *defining things* and *interpreting definitions*. As both a professional and hobbyist programmer, that is also a large part of *my* trade. Programmers *define* how a computer should react to a given set of inputs, and we do so by *telling* the computer how what those definitions are - we *program* it. (Let there be no mystery surrounding that word!)

One element of my native English which i've had to nearly abandon since leaving the States is *slang*. Slang is, by *definition*, very fluid in nature, more often driven by fad and stylistic reasons more than current cultural requirements. What this means is that slang doesn't transfer well from language to language. It changes too often. The first time i heard an American shout "Sweet!" i had to chuckle, because i knew that the German guy with us had no clue how to interpret that. i only picked it up by his tone of voice and other contextual details. His slang would have been well understood to most young- or middle-aged Americans, however.

One of the most important tips for travelers is this: realize what words are slang and stop using them.

One notable exception to this rule comes to mind: "cool" is used worldwide. "Sweet" is not, nor is "awesome" (i'm not sure if that ever did reach Germany, and the Americans retired it in the mid-80's).

Some examples of slang which we often don't even realize are slang:

- "Where's the john [or the head]?" Ask where the *toilet* is, instead. It's *not* a shameful word.
- "Can you show me to the little boys?" (same as above *unless translated literally!*)
- "That costs 5 bucks?" What's a *buck*?
- "Have you got a quarter or a dime?" What the *hell* are those? However, "penny" is common across many languages and seems to universally denote the most atomic unit of currency. A penny can't be split any further. No country i've been to has had a sub-penny.
- "Is the buffet all you can eat?" Don't even ask. The word buffet would not be a problem, but "all you can eat" is. You're not in America anymore. (In fact, German borrows that phrase from English - it doesn't have a native equivalent.)

A close cousin of slang is the *colloquialism*. Colloquialisms are essentially slang or phrases which have survived the tests of time and become long-term parts of the common culture. Some common English examples include, "out of sight!" (as in "great!") and, "put the pedal to the medal." Like slang, colloquialisms rarely have the same meaning when translated literally, so try to avoid them.

When in doubt, use words and phrases you learned in your earliest school years, or before you started school. The reasoning behind this is very simple: non-native speakers typically start learning English in school, just like you did. However, relatively few of them use English day to day. So speak to them on a common level. Don't forget that even pre-school children can say quite a lot. Often more than mommy and daddy would really like for them to.

With some practice, after a while you will learn to quickly judge what "level" of English you can use with different people. Reacting on these judgements will inherently change the way you communicate with people who have varying levels of skill with your native language. A common mistake is to speak to all non-native speakers as you would to a native. Many non-natives can handle this, but many cannot, so it's safe to first assume a "simpler" level of English is suitable, and then step up the pace and level of complexity if the listener shows that they understand. *Don't*, however, *ever* view anyone as unintelligent or unlearned just because they don't know *your* language. Intelligence surpasses language boundaries, and just because the inventor of the Quantum Ejection Rocket System who you've just asked for directions can't understand your question doesn't mean he's dumb.

3.6 The word "i"

Disclaimer: i'm about to break an earlier promise about not harping on philosophical views.

Okay, i really didn't want to go into this, but people sometimes give me a hard time about it, and i've never taken the time to explain it fully to anyone. So, for the first time ever, i'm going to put in writing why i refuse to capitalize the word "i", despite blatantly breaking one of the first rules of language which every English-literate person learns.

First a summary, in no particular order, then we'll go over each in a bit more detail. It boils down to a mix of practicality, philosophy, and hypocrisy:

1. Carpal tunnel. Reputedly, "i" is the most common word in the English language, and thus presumably the one typed most often. With the SHIFT key that *i* becomes two keystrokes. i type a *lot*, and like to save every keystroke i can.
2. Many languages do not capitalize the personal pronoun, a fact i didn't know until i started learning German in junior high school.
3. Philosophically, the importance of "I" is overstated, and thus i feel the capitalization is not justified. i honestly believe that this has subtle cultural implications which we conventionally underestimate.
4. The hypocritical side of the previous point: by "understating" my "i-ness" with lower-case, i inherently differentiate my writing, however subtly, from conventional English, and in doing so draw attention to the i-ness/ego-ness of the word. Thus the philosophical argument is self-defeating. But see below...

The first time i did it, in the summer of 2001, was a conscious effort to save strain on my aching hands. i was having a particularly painful RSI [Repetative Stress Injury] spell that week, and decided to try it out as an experiment: why expend two keystrokes for one letter? It was probably a placebo effect, but i quickly became very comfortable with it. Then, of course, i set out to philosophically justify it...

At the time i was going through my own personal hell due to a particularly painful failed relationship, and was drowning in self-pity. It got so bad that i didn't eat for two weeks, ended up passing out, cutting my forehead on the floor when i landed, ending up in the emergency room with half-critical-level blood sugar levels, and a stitched left eye the size of a pingpong ball. It was in *that* frame of mind that i first started looking for a philosophical handhold, as it were - a justification for my breach of English etiquette. It shouldn't be too difficult to imagine where that mindset might lead: the Littleness of the Self vis-a-vis the Greater Scheme of Things. Obviously, the lower-case "i" can be interpreted as a direct manifestation of that mindset.

But that wasn't enough of a justification for me - you don't go violating the rules of written language just because you're depressed.

While i have been aware since my teenage years that many languages, like German, don't capitalize the personal pronoun, i didn't really contemplate that detail until around my Great Depression period. Now, this is all theory, but this is what i currently think...

The conventional capitalization of "I" comes from a culture - the English - which i describe in the Stereotypes section, however rightly or wrongly, as "self-driven." That is to say: the individual is typically more driven by self-serving motivations than most members of most other cultures. America derives directly from that same culture, with the addition that it was originally founded as the side-effect of frustration with mamma, so to say - a rebellious child.

America has truly shown to deserve its title of "the Land of Opportunity", and that has bred a competitive people who have little compunction against chasing new opportunities. Unless, of course, those opportunities challenge a strong religious or otherwise cultural taboo, in which case you're likely to see a 50/50 split of for/against on any given issue, if for no reason other than the sake of competition and freedom of expression. Where the Brits and the Americans differ there, is that the all parties in any *British* argument will find undisputable, solid logic to back their case. Conversely, in America, typically one party - sometimes two, if there are three or more parties - will present a well-backed case and the remaining parties are just being hard-headed for the sake of competition and personal expression or due to some fluke of social evolution.

My biggest philosophical complaint with American culture has always been the *I-centricity* of the laws and customs. The logic is simple: when 300 million people are all taught that they are the single most important piece in the larger machine, *the culture is sitting on ticking time bomb*. City planners, politicians, and leaders of all types have struggled for thousands of years to find ways to fit ever-increasing numbers of people in

ever-diminishing amounts of space. This requires more and more cooperation, and less and less personal ego. Teaching *each and every one of your citizens* that *they* are the *most important* element in the system is inherently counter to the goal of keeping an ever-growing system stable.

The American legal system is continually the brunt of jokes in Europe. Most of them refer back to the classic mid-90's case where a woman successfully sued McDonalds for an absurd amount of money because she burned herself with her coffee on the way out of the drive-thru. While that was a single case, it was one of many such truly absurd abuses of a legal system which places the *I* above the *We*.

So, my theory is essentially that the capitalization of the personal pronoun is at least partially responsible for the relatively competitive cultures associated with historic England and its young and restless offspring, America. Whether this is an overall positive or negative is a debate i won't be dragged in to and won't even begin to speculate on. My main, and probably only, point here is that i consider the time-bomb problem to be an inherently fatal flaw in the culture, and think that it might be subtly corrected, in the long-term, by changing the language conventions and deemphasizing the *i*. It'd take a long time to have any notable effect, sure, but what's 200 years when you're building the largest, most overall successful empire the world has ever seen? While empires like the Egyptians stood for thousands of years, they did so through harsh rule. Those days are long-gone, and we need to find ways to allow billions of people to fit onto any given continent. Cooperation and social-friendly behaviour are key elements to achieving that, both currently being subtly undermined by a mere fluke of language convention (though i'm not convinced that it *was* a fluke!).

We shouldn't need disasters like hurricane Katrina (and now Rita!) to remind us that the collapse of civilization is *not* as far away as we'd all love to think it is. The sooner we learn to get along, the more likely we are to keep all this insanity going for a while longer. "The play's the thing!" did someone not once write?

So, here's my attempt to change the world: stop capitalizing your personal pronoun for a day and see how it feels. If you like it, keep doing it. In handwriting, you'll even save more energy than when typing: three strokes in *I* vs. one stroke and a dot in *i*. Thus, you can express your Self *even faster* if don't capitalize the personal pronoun ;-).

Yes, i *do* actually know other people who prefer, and use, the lower-case. i haven't asked them why they do so.

Assuming you give it a try, a guideline you may or may not want to follow is: when quoting someone, give them the respect of capitalizing their pronoun if they would have written that way. Bob said, "I went to the store," for example.

After much mental wrestling over the matter, i do *not* capitalize i *at the beginning of sentences*, though i believe i initially did do so. Capitalizing *i* at the beginning of the sentence would be philosophically equivalent to the "I'm a vegetarian but I eat chicken" argument, which i've never quite bought: you're either a vegetarian or you're not, you're not both a vegetarian *and* a meat-eater. Given the definition of *vegetarian*, that argument impossible to hold. i don't care if you eat meat or not, but be consistent. Change your mind if and when you need to, but not in mid-sentence/mid-meal. Show *some* level of consistency. Human relationships are based on stability and trust, and it's hard to have vegetarian over for dinner if i'm not convinced she won't change her habits mid-meal and get an unexplicable hunger for my poor little Denver [the cat, remember?]. An *arbitrary, extreme, and admittedly harsh* example, but *nonetheless philosophically valid* under the popular Vegichick Philosophy. As i said, i don't quite buy it, and thus *i* gets lower-cased even at the start of a sentence.

4 Cultural differences

4.1 The electrical cable and wall socket

Growing up in America, we are taught to be very careful when plugging in and unplugging electrical devices: the design of the plugs is such that you can electrocute yourself while un/plugging one. In preschool we watched instruction videos warning us of the dangers. In between Saturday-morning cartoons we saw Public Service Announcements showing us how to properly avoid getting the shit shocked out of us. We learned *proper respect* for electrical plugs.

Well, those damned European Foreigners *didn't*.

It's interesting to examine why...

Most of Europe uses a design which is fundamentally similar to sockets in America, but with one significant difference: the plugs are *inset* into the wall. The depth of the inset is about the length of the prongs on the end of the cable. Ergo, it's *impossible*, under normal circumstances, to electrocute yourself while un/plugging it.

The profound implication of this is that German children, indeed most or all European children, have probably *never* wasted a single moment of their childhood learning about how to *safely* use the common electrical plugs which surround them every day (even moreso in recent years). *Their design precludes their misuse.*

This is a lesson we all can learn from.

Aside from that, there is a more obvious, less profound difference in electrical cables across the oceans:

In America, cables are typically about a meter long. In Europe, they are typically two meters long. While i knew that before moving here, from my work with the Europeans at Compaq, it was only after setting up my first flat in Munich that i realized why this is so: European buildings have far fewer electrical outlets than American ones. A large number of European buildings were built before every home had a demand for so much electricity, whereas American homes are typically not built to last more than a few generations anyway, and so can continually be rebuilt to meet current requirements. Since there are fewer outlets in European homes, the outlets are spaced further apart. Therefore, you typically need longer cables. Even in newly-built flats, the ratio of outlets to wall space isn't as high as in American homes. Whether this is for reasons of cultural *status quo*, aesthetic design, building regulations, or something else, i have no idea.

4.2 Personal Space

A common complaint from newcomers to Germany is that "people cut in line." This is actually not the case, though. Remember that Germans are people who value precision. And remember that a line can be represented by a continual, unbroken series of points. As the Germans see it, if you leave 2 feet of space, it's not a line anymore. Thus, if you want to eat at a stand-in-line restaurant, get used to cuddling up to the guy in front of you. If you don't, you're likely to wait much longer, as people will keep stepping in front of you to keep that line in its correct and proper geometric shape.

In fact, i cannot think of a German equivalent to "personal space," and would not be surprised if none exists.

5 Oktoberfest (*Wies'n*)

Oktoberfest, despite its name, actually starts in September. Reputedly it originally started in October but was moved back to September to try to take advantage of some warmer weather. That part doesn't always work. The *Wies'n*, as the Bavarians call it, is a two-week (or so) celebration held every year. Its origins go back about a hundred years - it was held to celebrate, if i remember correctly, a wedding. Or maybe it was a dragon slaying. Those details aren't significant here, though.

When i moved to Germany, at the age of 26, i had consumed, in my entire life, only five beers. Inherited from my mother, i have a physical distaste for beer - it's too bitter. Neither of my biological parents have a tendency to drink, either. What all that means is, my first Oktoberfest nearly killed me.

Two beers. Two *big, Bavarian* beers was all it took.

If it weren't for then-colleague Johnny Olsen leading me home that night, both of us stumbling across the city, from the *Wies'n* grounds all the way to Rosenheimerplatz, i would *still* be wandering around Munich trying to find my hotel. i vaguely remember the two of us stopping at an all-night bar/restaurant and talking with an older German woman and her much younger boyfriend. They were, like so many others who frequent the *Wies'n* and bars in the area, interested in speaking to the tourists. The most amazing thing to me at the time was that the restaurant served *food* at that hour, which is practically a unique occurrence in Germany. i vaguely remember puking in one of their toilets before Johnny led us the rest of the way across town.

The whole next day, i puked. Three days long, i had stomach cramps. Unless you're from a culture where the average citizen can hold their liquor *and* go to work the next day, always plan on taking the following day off after a trip to the Oktoberfest.

And i've been back every year since then. i don't drink much between each *Wies'n*, but when the festival comes around then i've got to make at least one visit.

But i didn't find that all-night restaurant again until a year ago.

If you have never personally experienced the Oktoberfest, it is difficult to appreciate it. It is indescribable. Physically, it's placed on a large fairground, probably close to a kilometer long and nearly half that wide. There are a dozen or so large "beer tents", which physically resemble tents but are much sturdier, being built up in the weeks preceding the festival. Each tent holds between 7000 and 15000 people. Aside from the tents are the

conventional circus rides and games, like a roller-coaster, a Ferris wheel, bumper cars, dart and air-gun games, etc. And every form of souvenir conceivable. You'd be amazed at what *shit* people will buy under the influence of alcohol (who, me?). There's also lots of room to walk around, though in the evenings the crowds can be thick, and don't necessarily walk in orderly lines. When the festival closes at 11 each night, the two nearby train stations are flooded with stinking, drinking, singing, and sometimes puking (who, *me?*) visitors who've had a tad too much alcohol for their own good. i did puke in a train station once, but i made it to a garbage can in time, avoiding making a mess of the floor. The bad part was, i was seeing Sabine, her brother, and sister off from our second date, and had been fighting for two minutes to keep it from coming up. It was difficult to say good night without puking. Luckily, we weren't at the kissing stage at that point, or the relationship might have ended with a very messy good night kiss. *Now* it's funny. *Now* we can laugh about it, but when you're trying to impress a beautiful young German woman, puking *isn't* so funny. She didn't see it, thank goodness, but i did tell her about it at some point. As her mother is a pharmacist, she has developed an unusually advanced appreciation for the chemical processes of the body.

Anyway...

By the time seven or eight o'clock rolls around, almost every one of those thousands of people per tent has a liter of beer in the glass in front of them, between one and three liters, sometimes more, in their digestive and circulatory systems.

Let's do a thinking exercise, using only what we know about human nature. As our frame of reference, let's use our colleagues, our friends, ourselves, and other people we know. Now imagine those people - including yourself - jammed into a tent. The tent has 12000 other people, all of whom need to piss just as badly as you do after consuming between 1.5 and 4 liters of house-brewed beer (that's a lot stronger than the "yellow water" from Americans breweries!). Aside from the risk of losing your hard-fought seat, getting to the toilet and back does not pose a particular logistical problem in and of itself. You might have to squeeze a bit to get through the people, but you won't get lost. And don't forget that you will almost certainly lose your seat (if you had one) before you get back. i'll never forget the time Pat Paul lost his seat without getting up. The poor drunk bastard simply slipped right off of it and disappeared down under the table. Luckily, he didn't nail his chin to the tabletop on his way down - it was a *clean slide*. That was the same night he bet us 20 DMarks that he could drink 10 Mass (ten liters). As i recall, he admirably made it to number four - it *might* have been six (and he'd tell you it was eight) - before we called off the bet in the interest of saving his life. Then he disappeared under the table. That was my first year at the Wies'n. To this day, that was the most "eventful" trip.

Now, using only our intuition as a guide, let's add up the following variables and let's look at what's likely to come out:

- Iraquis, Iranians, Nigerians, Algerians, Danes, Dutchmen, Norwegians, Swedes, Eires, Scottsmen, Englishmen, Australians, Austrians, New Zealanders, Italians, Turks, Frenchmen, Russians, Ukrainians, Finnlanners, Canadians, Mexicans, Portuguese, Americans, Asians of all types, those always-in-ear-shot Italians, and *even a German or three...*
- All at the same table, or in very close vicinity.
- Most have processed, say, 2+ liters of beer, are processing it in their system, or have by now sent it safely on its way through the public waterworks. In any case, they're all unfit to drive, and many too unfit to drive even a bumper car.
- On the stage, elevated near the center of the tent, a Bavarian band plays its rendition of Cher's rendition of "Hey, Baby!" Or, if you're lucky, Bob Denver's "Take me Home, Country Road." [... to the place... where I belong... West Virginia! Country mamma! Take me home ... country road...] (It's a catchy tune, and captivating when 10000 people sing along!)
- Most of the people are singing along. Not the whole time, but when one of the well-known songs is played. (God, please not *Hey, Baby!* again! Four years ago, in the *six months* after Oktoberfest, every time the bars closed that song echoed through the subways of Munich.)
- More beer.
- Conversations about politics. You might just be from the state of Texas, while your listeners might be from Afganistan, Iraq, Indonesia, or Korea. Been there. Done that.
- An Australian rugby team at the table just behind yours (as in just *5 centimeters* behind yours) is having a friendly spat, one of them pulling another across the table... *by his hair*. And the guy being pulled is not screaming, only going red in the face and looking *really* pissed off. (True story, though the guy doing the pulling was next to me, so i got a *good* view.)

- Back to politics with The Enemy. They want to know who *you* voted for. ("Umm... *definitely* that other guy.")
- More beer.
- More *Hey, Baby!* It is a blessing of nature that while alcohol often makes you *see* double, you don't *hear* double.
- And now *we're all* singing along with it! (Father, forgive me, for i have sinned...)
- Hey, look! A woman took off her top and jumped up on the table! Oh, nevermind - it's some old Greek lady. (There's a very funny story involving three naked men, but i'll tell it later.)
- That dude beside you accidentally spills half his beer down your shirt while trying to clamber up the table and dig out his Zippo for the next playing of *Sierre Madre*. (i prefer to remember it as, "the account manager intercepted my beer when it spun out of control during ascent.")

One thing's been proven time and time again: you get to know your work colleagues in *whole new ways* at the Wies'n.

Given all of the people you and i know, and all of the people *they* know, and all of those we see on TV and read about in Time Magazine... Given all of *those* people, in *that* situation, what is likely to happen?

Think about it.

Think twice.

Think thrice.

Here's the answer:

All-out War!

War would be the only logical conclusion. Beating the antagonists with beer glasses is probably where it would start. Those things aren't light. It might not escalate much further before the Peacekeepers broke it up, but there might be a forking here and there.

We could not get *that many* people from *any single culture* into the same tent, half of them smoking a cigarette, a pipe, or a cigar, often all three at once, listening to *that* music, drinking *only* beer brewed by the sponsoring tent. It couldn't hold up for long. Human nature is against it.

But the Oktoberfest doesn't dissolve into war. Sure, there are altercations, but they are few and far between. The security is tight, even tighter since 9/11, and the police don't have any compulsion against throwing out anyone who gets rough. At the same time, they're not at all intrusive - they let the people get on with their business until a cancer cell pops up, and then they move quickly and quietly and get it out of the way. We don't *ask* what happens to those who are taken. They're just *taken away*.

As of literally 6 hours ago, i own my first pair of *Lederhosen* - a pair of traditional German pants. The Wies'n starts day after tomorrow (17 September, 2005), and a work colleague, a young Turk named Emre, has talked me in to going in full-gear to a group outing next Monday. In all my time here, i have never allowed myself to wear a *Tracht* because i've always considered them the sole right of the locals. (The *Einheimliche*, not the *Eindringlinge*, if you can handle a German pun.) After eight years, though, it's time to dawn one along with the rest of them.

After surviving eight annual trips - next week will be the ninth - to the Wies'n, the toilet, and then back to normal life, i think i've got it figured out...

5.1 Why doesn't Oktoberfest result in an annual massacre?

i have, many times, sat at a table with people from nearly every halfway-civilized country on earth, while shit-faced drunk.

This is, believe it or not, one of those experiences which i believe every adult human needs to go through, if only one time. It is an experience which, over time, reveals one of the most interesting reasons why this seeming breeding ground of sin and corruption does not implode under the forces of the more high-profile aspects of human nature like impatience and intolerance.

Because people are *curious*.

In any given evening at the Wies'n you'll be asked, and will likely ask, the same questions time and time again. Where do you come from? Is it *really* illegal to chew gum in Singapore? Why is your English so good? Oh, so you *do* have a boyfriend back home?

After that, they normally talk about their trip through Europe, their impressions of where they've been, and maybe some politics, at least on a superficial level. They ask about stereotypes, rumors, and urban myths. For example, when asked where i come from, while i should say Houston, i normally do not because the response normally contains the word "cowboy" or "oil," and i'm so damned sick of hearing it. When i give my birth-city, Las Vegas, it makes a more positive impression, but the response is still predictable: "I didn't know anyone actually *lived* there." Well, we lived in the *suburbs*. (Well, what *was* the suburbs in the late 70's, and is probably a parking lot by now.)

Hannes Duerr, one of single most clever people i have ever met, once made an interesting observation about his relationship with his then-girlfriend, a tennis player from one of the Eastern Block countries. He noted, "because English is not native for either of us, we can't discuss complicated topics. That makes the relationship much less complicated for both of us."

While simple, it is a profound observation. This same principle also plays a large role in the avoidance of a human catastrophe in downtown Munich each Fall. Because most of the participants are interacting in a non-native language, they cannot go into the detailed conversations which native speakers often can. In general, most humans normally agree on most morals-related issues. It's the *details* of those issues which divide us, and those details don't normally get discussed around the Oktoberfest drinking table. Keeping conversations at a superficial level acts as a buffer against many of the tensions which might otherwise cause undue stress between co-party-goers who come from opposite ends of any given political spectrum. It also appeases most peoples' curiosities enough to satisfy them, which in turn helps put them in a good mood. Nearly everyone has a good time.

Of course, the mass quantities of beer also help calm down most of the people. You'll see a rowdy drunk every now and then, but it's never long before very fit, very sober security guards come to take the party-pooper away.

5.2 The naked cameraman

Above, i hinted at a funny story involving some naked people at Oktoberfest...

Forewarning: the following story is a obscene. It does not represent the norm at the Wies'n, and is a memory without compare which took place during the 1997 festival.

The following story *is not funny*:

A group of us newly-Muncheners from the office, plus a few of the American colleagues who would soon fly back, had a reserved spot in, if i recall correctly, the Hypozelt. Just exactly as happens in a school lunchroom when a fight starts, everyone stands up and looks to where the action is. So we all stood up. Five or six tables away stood three guys, who i assumed to be Americans, but whos balsyness, as it were, in hindsight now marks them more as Australians or New Zealanders. All of them buck-naked, except for shoes, and dancing to whatever song the band was playing. The one in the middle also had a fanny-pack and a video camera, aimed out at the crowd. Well, *one* hand was on the camera. With the other hand, he was, shall we say, manually stimulating himself. All the while, spinning slowly around while the crowd clapped on to the music and cheered him on. It lasted a few seconds before he stepped down or was pulled down, i don't remember which.

Reminder: that's not funny.

This is funny:

When that dude got back home, he showed this video to his friends and family. In the video they see 10000+ screaming people from a hundred countries cheering the intrepid cameraman on. But i'm quite certain he will never tell, mom, dad, brother, sister, nanny and papa *why* the crowd cheered him on.

5.3 Oktoberfest 2005: a true story

On the 19th of September, 2005, i joined many of my work colleagues at the Wies's. In most Munich companies it is customary for employees to arrange trips to the Wies'n, either formally or informally. The main advantage of doing so, as opposed to just going on your own, is that you normally get a reserved table (unless you're late, in which case you forfeit it).

While i will not use any actual names of my colleagues here, i will shamelessly tell of one of my most embarrassing evenings *ever*. Probably the single most embarrassing evening of my life. In fact, i'm *extremely lucky* to have walked away from it with my life.

Before i do, though, i feel compelled to make a small disclaimer: as mentioned before, i'm not a heavy drinker. i go out less than five times a year, and only once a year or so do i drink myself sick. This story may give the impression that i'm a drunkard, when in fact i am simply unable to handle alcohol as gracefully as my German neighbors.

It all began as normal...

Well, almost normal. This would be my ninth annual trip to the festival, and i had never been in *Tracht* - dressed up in the traditional Lederhosen. Last week i got one. Surprisingly, i found myself wishing i had done it 8 years ago - those pants are *comfortable!* i skipped on the shoes, opting for my conventional sandals. They matched the outfit, as did my toe rings (i've worn toe rings for about 10 years now, and do in fact get some pleasure in having people comment on them).

Edgy the whole day at work, most of us wanted to leave as early as possible and start the "social collaboration." One of the most interesting things about going to the Fest with colleagues is that you get to know them in *whole new ways*. You don't *really* know your boss until he's got three liters of beer in him.

Upon arrival, we found many of our "remote" colleagues (they work in another office) were already downing their first beers and munching on traditional appetizers which were spread out on large wooden trays - raw slabs of trees is more accurate. Coincidentally, the waitress was sitting there as we arrive and we were immediately handed our beers. Which, of course, we proceeded to drink...

Hey, Baby! It couldn't be avoided, could it? The only consolation was this: by the time it came around (20:00? 21:00?), enough beer was in my system to numb me from any potential mental disorders which hearing it *again* might have otherwise induced. So, like the rest of the drunken bastards, i danced on the table and sang along as well. Shameful, but true. i refuse, however, to feel any shame to singing along to *Take me Home, Country Road*. Classic song, that is. And the *raw power* of 12000+ drunken people from dozens of countries singing it in unison is truly an amazing feeling.

Believe it or not, the Oktoberfest shuts its doors at 23:00. The German laws are very pro-peace-and-quiet, and restaurants, bars, and whatnot which are in residential areas typically have to pipe it down by 23:00. This essentially means they have to take all the noise inside, which isn't practical for the Weis'n, or close down for the night at 23:00.

Imagine, then, some 12 or 15 tents, each with up to 15000 people in them (half that for the smaller tents), plus another few thousand, if not ten thousand, wandering around outside the tents... all of them trying to squeeze out a relative handful of exits. Most of them want to take the train or a taxi. By some logistical twist of fate, the main taxi stand and the only train station within a five minute walk, are located right next to each other. It gets a bit tight, to say the least. You're better off doing what most of the natives do: keep walking to the *next* station, of which there are two within five minutes or so, and the central station about 10 minutes by foot. Aside from saving on sanity and wait times in the train station (it's a very small one), it gives you the chance to get some fresh air. It might be entertaining - if only for a brief moment - to imagine the chain reactions which can happen in the subways when one of the *fully tanked* travellers finally pukes, pushed over the edge by the sticky heat of an underground train station filled to more than twice its capacity and the slow bobbing of the train - not unlike the gentle bobbing of a ship on gentle waves.

After 10 or 15 of us made out way outside, we stood in the middle of the road debating what to do next. By that point, i had officially downed two beers and unofficially another one or two, as i just kept drinking from whatever glass was nearest. There were *lots* of glasses of beer around, so this never posed a logistical problem, even for someone as impaired by alcohol as myself.

As usual for the situation, 90% of the people pussied out at that point. While i normally join the wimps and take that chance to crawl into bed, two colleagues - we'll call them, rather arbitrarily, Frisbee and Yoyo - were particularly persuasive in talking me in to moving on to the next party (of which there are definately no shortages in Munich, whether during Oktoberfest or not). We started walking to Hauptbahnhof - the central station - and soon came across a rickshaw driver. We hopped on...

If you've never driven a older-model Volkswagen Beetle, and never ridden on a rickshaw, it's probably difficult to accurately imagine. The experiences are remarkably similar, except that on a rickshaw you can sneeze without risk of breaking your nose against the windscreen or that part just under the window which must presumably have been an attempt at a dashboard. A Beetle is also noisier, and has approximately the same carrying capacity and horsepower as a single, well-trained bicyclist like the one pushing us along. Nonetheless, like a VW Beetle, the rickshaw was fun.

About a half-block from the station, the three of us cruising very comfortably down the road on the front of a fat bicycle, Yoyo spotted a topless bar on the right and directed the driver there.

Disclaimer time: i am also not a titty-bar man. i have no fundamental moral problem with it, it just doesn't turn me on. The idea of money for sex is just a turn-off for me, probably a side-effect of my mildly conservative American upbringing. *However...*

Beer. Don't forget the beer. Never underestimate the impact of beer, especially the effects of beer on small groups of males.

So, voicing no objections, Yoyo, Frisbee and myself entered.

At this point, i was fairly well plastered (that's 1990's American slang for *really drunk*). i wasn't seeing double, and wasn't sick to my stomach, but also wasn't in any shape to do anything requiring any degree of coordination.

As we would find out a few minutes later, guiding a dollar note into a panty strap *does not require much coordination*. The topless dancing industry certainly benefits greatly from this largely unobserved phenomenon.

This is where it all starts to get really, *really* hazy...

Yoyo or Frisbee, i'm not sure which, bought us a little pile of fake dollar notes to hand out. For health/safety reasons, they don't use real cash - the notes are made of a much sturdier material than real money, suitable for steam-washing. We can only speculate why. *Coins* might be an interesting idea, but i'm not sure the women would warm up to the idea of being slipped cold metal coins. Let's not contemplate that.

Frisbee went off and got us drinks - he and i had Vodka-Bulls and Yoyo had something else, not sure what. Like the other 20-some-odd customers, we sat along the catwalk watching the young ladies, sipping our drinks, and handing out our dollar notes.

We continued this for what seemed to me to be only 10 or 20 minutes, though i now know it must have been much longer. i didn't pass out during that time (i've done that before), but i did, for the first time in my life, apparently *black out*. The period between about midnight and 6:30 is, as far as my brain is comprised of only a few short glimpses of what was probably reality. The rest is completely gone. While this is an extremely disturbing experience, we haven't gotten that far yet, so let's tell the story and then contemplate the disturbance-factor...

For whatever reason, one of the dancers approached us, singled me out, and started to talk. i don't remember the first few things she said, and i don't remember ever saying anything other than *ja* or *okay* at any point. Not that she was, in and of herself, attractive - pretty, yes, but none of them were "my type" - but that i simply didn't have any say-so whatsoever over my brain at the time. i knew deep down, from experience, that for my own safety's sake, when i am that far gone, i simply need to "do as the natives", and go along with whatever's going on. If i don't, i risk potentially endangering myself and others even more - for example, walking down the middle of a busy street and not realizing it. (No, i haven't ever done that, i but i can conceive of it happening, so i try to avoid putting myself in that situation.) So, i really had no choice but simply to follow Yoyo, Frisbee, and our new friend - who's name i never remember asking nor hearing - around for the evening.

To side-track for a moment, but not far: a tip i will offer all drinkers out there: recognize when your ability to judge things has failed. At this point it is best not to try to judge anything. At some point, our ability to judge *our own ability to judge* completely breaks down, and it is important to recognize when this happens, primarily for safety's sake, but also for sanity's. We'll see a concrete example of this in a moment...

i only vaguely remember her asking me if i would like a "private dance." (Before jumping to conclusions - it was *just* that, a dance. i *know* this is Europe, but we're in downtown Munich.) Of course, i had no choice but to nod okay and following along. We sat off in a side room for a few minutes, she did her dance, then we went back out to the bar. Today at work, Yoyo told me that we were gone "a long time" - half an hour or more - and *several times*. i have *absolutely no recollection* of it, however. Zero. i remember about 30 seconds of the first dance, and remember even feeling surprised that it had been so short. My sense of time and my memory were obviously both ruined by that point.

What i do remember is her leading me to the bar, where the bartendress then played her part, asking, "would you like to invite the young lady to a glass of champagne?"

Of course, i've already stated my policy, so you know what happened. i nodded coolly in agreement.

"That will be 200 Euros," she said.

While i internally gagged a slight bit, it didn't *terribly* surprise me, so i nodded again. Fine. It wouldn't be the first time i've simply thrown money into a black hole. Aside from that, i knew that i couldn't have said at the time with any degree of accuracy if i was even awake or not. My ability to reason and judge were about as low as they can possibly be. That's no exaggeration of a "drunkard who's been there." i was fully aware that

my judgement had gone "fully negative" by that point - i couldn't distinguish reality from non-reality. As i mentioned earlier, when that happens, it is best to pick a person (or people) who you believe do have *some* grasp on reality and simply monkey them until your judgement comes back. It's an effective tactic, in my experience.

So, the woman fetched us a bottle of Moet Chandon (there's an umlaut missing from that 'e') and one glass. i don't remember if i told her i didn't want a glass, but i didn't, so the fact that the bottle came with only a single glass was psychologically interesting but otherwise insignificant. We walked back over to the catwalk, where she carefully - with as much grace as she could muster (which was no small amount) - poured her glass and stood such that one of my arms was on either side of her, my hands rested on the edge of the catwalk. i was very careful not to come into undue contact with her, mainly because i've got an odd set of social rules, one of which says: if there is an over-abundance of men and a shortage of women, do not allow yourself to get too much attention from a woman, because if you do, you will also get the attention of the men - only a different kind of attention. Thus, in social events i'm almost invariably the King of the Wallflowers. It's not that i'm gay, i just don't like to unduly cause distress.

That is where my memory ends. The next scene was a brief flash in a taxi. i have no idea how i got in it. i have no idea how the driver got my address - it's not written on any of my papers, and i haven't re-registered since i moved a few months ago, so it's not available through, e.g., directory service. The only reasonable answer is that i told him where i lived.

i remember, vaguely, being stopped in front of my apartment building - a small four-family building - and trying to recover my senses enough to pay the driver. Even drunken, i could have guessed the cost fairly accurately because i ride that approximate route a few times a week by cab. i remember - again, very vaguely - having had trouble finding my bills. He asked, "you don't have the money, do you?" i knew, even in my state of mind, that i did, but i needed a moment to find the proper pocket. i *think* i remember giving him a 20 and telling him to keep the change (the cost, in my experience, would have been about 17 Euros, so this memory *might* be correct). In any case, i must have gotten out of the taxi, but i don't remember doing it.

i walked to the entryway of my building, which is around the back (very common for German houses), dug out my keys and proceeded to try to open the door. In my state, however, i couldn't get the key in the lock. i looked to the *Namenschild* - the nameplates of the residents - to find the light switch, which i *know* is the bottom button and is colored differently than the other nameplates. It just wasn't there, though. i looked carefully, but couldn't focus my vision out further than about a foot and certainly wasn't just seeing one of everything. i couldn't read it. i *knew* the nameplate looked wrong somehow, but i was far too drunken to realize what was wrong with it. i *knew* this with absolute certainty.

Yet i persisted. Several attempts at getting the key into the door failed. i looked around for signs that i was at the right door. The tree was in the proper place, the fence behind me as well, as was the *Namenschild* and the two windows on either side of the door. Yet i *knew* that the content of the nameplates wasn't correct - it was arranged in two columns, indicating 6 or 8 families, instead of the single column of four names on my building. i *knew* this.

However, i also knew that my ability to judge the correctness of the *Namenschild* could not be trusted.

Frustrated, drunken beyond all measure, and extremely cold - it was 5 or 6 degrees that night (about 40 degrees Fahrenheit) - i did the only thing which i knew was halfway reasonable: i consciously made the decision to shut down and wait until daylight, when i could figure out what was up with my key and this damned *Namenschild*. i had no idea what time it was, and didn't know at the time that the temperature was dangerously low for someone in my clothing. i know now that it must have been sometime between 3:00 and well before sunrise, but don't know more precisely than that. i did look at my phone for the time, but don't remember actually acknowledging the number on the screen. i simply sat down next to the door, leaned my head on the wall, shivered again, and *immediately* went into a deep sleep. i didn't even have the decency to mutter, "never again," and "*this* is why i don't drink," to myself, as i normally do when i'm laying in bed after a night's drinking. In actuality, i didn't *feel* bad at all, physically. i was too drunken to feel anything.

Contextual detail: i'm a very light sleeper. Without exaggeration: my last alarm clock always made an almost imperceptible *tick* about a quarter of a second before its annoying banter began. During that quarter-second of silence before the hellish noise, the only sound in my flat was my hand breaking the sound barrier as it flew to the snooze button to intercept that horrible, soul-penetrating *brrrrrp brrrrrp brrrrrp*. It invariably spelled *brrrrrp* in **BIG LETTERS**. The point being, i'm a very light sleeper, and that i can often react to being woken up with seemingly inhuman speed. We've all got a superpower or two, and mine is waking up quickly. That power is sometimes convenient but otherwise pretty useless. On this day, however, i was thankful to have it.

Shortly after 6 in the morning, the turning of the doorknob, not two feet from my head, woke me up. i opened my eyes in time to see an older woman gasp in panic as she saw me when the door was about half open. Unusually quick for someone still circulating an estimated 2 liters of alcohol, and had just been awakened from

a concrete floor after a couple-hour cat-nap, i held up my hand in the universal, "calm down, no problem" gesture and said, "don't worry - i live here," then proceeded to stand up. She said, "no you don't!" Shocked, i said, "yes i do. i've lived here since April or so. Beal's the name." i probably indicated to the *Namenschild* at this point, but i'm not certain that i did.

She pointed out that she and i would certainly have seen each other before had i lived there. i admitted that that did in fact seem strange, but i wasn't yet clear enough of thought to consider the option that i wasn't at the right house. Then i said my street name and number. She quickly corrected me. She knew my street was "somewhere around here," but not exactly where. At that point, another neighbor - a man around my age - walked by and she asked him, but he had no idea where my street was. Doh.

Now, i should remember that conversation more clearly, but i don't. i remember it only in small flashes. i have no idea how long it went on. Maybe one minute, maybe three? i have no clue. For some reason, i showed her my passport - maybe she asked to see my ID, or maybe i just did it for no reason - and she gasped when she saw it, presumably because she had just learned that the drunken bastard on her doorstep was a foreigner (my dialect could easily have been hidden behind my poor motor skills at that point, so she might not have realized it before then). Her parents would have been at an age where they could have told her all kinds of horrible stories about "the Americans showing up on our doorstep!" *It's the invasion all over again!* That poor woman. i then remember leaving, simply walking down the street. i can only hope that i apologized profusely. Certainly she's heard stories of such things happening at Oktoberfest, but we live far enough out of the city center that she probably hasn't actually seen a real, (barely) live American passed out on her doorstep, and wearing *Lederhosen* and speaking German to boot. i am, thankfully, quite certain that i didn't throw up or otherwise soil their entryway. i do have a very brief image of the taxi driver stopping so i could throw up, but i only remember gagging once or twice, and not actually puking.

Now with the goal of finding *my* flat, i set out. i have no idea how long i walked, nor do i have any recollection of how i judged where to go. *None whatsoever.* i have only one very brief flash of memory where i saw my flat from the back side, so i know which direction i came from. i judged properly, in any case, and within what felt like only a minute or three, i was at *my* back door. The feeling of the key sliding into the lock was almost orgasmic. Life's little pleasures - knowing your bed is just a few steps away.

i ran upstairs, greeted Denver, quickly stripped - only then noticing how dirty my *Lederhosen* had become - and dove unceremoniously into bed. It never occurred to me to set my alarm.

Curiously, i woke up feeling quite well at 12:30 or so. "Shit!" i thought, and immediately sent an SMS (text message) to the office telling them i'd be there about 14:00. Surely they weren't surprised. i called Yoyo to find out if he had survived. In my very broken voice, i quickly told him the events of the evening. "i can't believe i paid 200 Euro for a bottle of champagne." As it turns out, life had a few more surprises regarding the night before: "Steve," he said, "as I remember it, you bought her two of them."

"No, i didn't - i bought one."

"I *think* you bought two."

"Did i?"

Proceeding to fish through my pockets, i indeed found two receipts from the bar, one for 200 and one for 210 Euros. Yoyo of course had to laugh at my blatant display of idiocy. i'm not pissed off at myself for having thrown away 410 Euros - it's not the first time - but i am ashamed and embarrassed that i can't even remember having done it. i literally mean *no recollection*. Zero. Just like Ronald Reagan during the Iran Contra Hearings in the mid-80's, i had - and still have - zero clue what happened with most of the evening. i had to have pulled the bank card from my pocket, i had to have entered my PIN, and i have to have put the card back in my pocket. Apparently the human brain can do such things without any conscious effort whatsoever. Now that i think about it, that should come as no surprise: females have been demonstrating this ability for *generations*. Capitalism apparently comes pre-packaged in our human DNA.

In any case, the receipts gave me small hints: 1:30 and 2:30-ish. That's about all i know.

Luckily - *extremely luckily* - i have a Guardian Angel out there who took *extremely* good care of me that night. i did, in fact, get back home with my passport, my keys, my mobile phone, my bank card, and my train ticket in my pocket. These small items are staples of my daily existence, and having lost any one of them (except for the train ticket) would have become a major ordeal for me. If you're gonna rob me, then take my cash, my computer, my Gameboy, or whatever, but *not* one of the items i just listed. Those are *important* to me.

i can only count my blessings and thank my Angel for keeping my things in my pants, as it were. Aside from a few small muscle and bone pains (undoubtedly from sleeping on the porch, propped against the wall at a very unnatural angle) i survived - indeed *truly Survived* - the Oktoberfest of 2005. While the fest runs for another week and a half or so, i don't think i'm going to push my luck on that again... this year.

There are a few open questions from the night of the 19th of September, 2005, however. One of the most interesting is this: why did i find a huge wad of dollar notes from the topless bar in my pocket in the morning? Did i *earn* them?

In a way i guess i did, but i'm just happy to have walked away - or been pulled along - safely, in one piece.

6 Shagwell the Igel

Hedgehogs (*de. Igel*, pronounced *ee-gel* with a short *g*) are a protected species in Germany and have a long history in German folklore. In the outskirts of Munich, every now and then you'll see one walking around in the grass or on the sidewalk. Late at night they dig around looking for morsels of food. They hibernate during the winter, so they are only seen during the relatively few warm months.

In the early winter of 1999, while walking home from the train station, i came across a small hedgehog on the sidewalk. A pitiful looking thing it was. Now i'm no expert on hedgehogs, but i realized that it was much too late in the year for him to be out and about. So i scooped him up in my hat and carried him home.

Sabine, who lived with me at the time, immediately took to it, so of course we had to name it. She was a big fan of *Austin Powers*, so we named it after a character in the film, Agent Shagwell, and got *Shagwell the Igel*.

Wild hedgehogs are shy creatures. When they detect anyone around, they typically sit very still and tuck their head and feet under their protective spines. When touched they tense up but otherwise don't respond. Thus Shagwell didn't do terribly much - not a very exciting pet. In any case, we knew full well we couldn't keep Shagwell. As a protected species, you can't just keep them as pets.

We prepared him a sleeping box, filled with Autumn leaves, but we didn't confine him to it, letting him have free run of the flat. If you've ever held or touched a hedgehog, you probably know that a cat cannot hurt one without a significant effort, so we weren't worried about Denver giving it any grief. To eat, we left him a cracked egg on a small plate.

Eventually we turned out the lights and went to bed. That was when Shagwell decided it was safe to look around.

The first sign of life we heard was the rapid *clickclickclickclick* of clawed hedgehog feet pattering across a parquet floor. Sabine and i both giggled at the sound, listening carefully to figure out what he would do. His sense of smell was apparently remarkable, because in very little time we heard his spines tapping against the plate, then the cracking sound of an egg. Then *slurpslurpslurp*, quickly, like a cat does.

The next day Sabine called a veterinarian to find out what we should do with it. The vet explained it was indeed too late in the year for hedgehogs to be out and that they should weigh around 500 grams, or more, in order to survive their long winter sleep. The pitiful Shagwell was significantly smaller - i judged around 350 grams. She told us what it might like to eat, how to prepare a sleeping place for it, and instructed us to set it free as soon as winter was over.

That evening Sabine and i had to go into town. Before we left, we checked on Shagwell and found that he wasn't doing well. He panted very quickly and he didn't respond to touch as he normally did, by tensing up. Not much we could do about it at that hour, we left to run our errands.

When we came back, poor little Shagwell lie dead in his bed of leaves. There would be no amusing *clickclickclick-slurpslurpslurp* that night.

Not quite sure what to do with Shagwell's body, we took him outside. The median in the street was quite large - a good 5 meters across - and lined with trees which had recently dropped huge piles of leaves. So we placed him where he probably would have gone under his own volition: burried under a pile of leaves.

Sabine reported to the veterinarian the following day, and she concurred that, based on our description of his size and condition, there was nothing we could have done to save Shagwell. If she asked what we did with the body, Sabine didn't tell me about it.

7 September 11th

While i'm not asked so much about it anymore, in the year or two following the historic tragedy, i was often asked what the atmosphere was like in Germany at the time it happened.

i was here, not in the U.S., when it happened, and so i cannot make a truly fair *comparison*. i can, however, describe to you what happened here.

An Austrian work colleague of mine came to my desk and said, in English, "two planes went in to the World Trade Center."

Thinking it was an opening line for "a man goes into a bar" joke, i waited a few seconds, expecting a punchline which never came. "What do you mean, two planes *went in* to the World Trade Center?"

i had no reason to think anything had happened. i thought it was just a mistake in his usage of English.

Then he explained that two planes had *flown into* the building, as in *crashed*. Body language, again, becomes important. i immediately ran upstairs to the conference room, where we had a TV. As usual, i was the last to find out - everyone was there already. Being the only American in the company, everyone turned to me as i came in, but nobody said a thing. We all just watched in horrified silence, broken only by the occasional "*das gibt doch nicht...*" ("that can't be...").

i don't remember how long we watched. Long enough to see the towers collapse. i still remember the shock and confusion in the room as we tried to figure out if the first tower had actually fallen or if it was just hidden behind the massive cloud of dust, smoke, and debris.

Das gibt doch nicht.

A while later i went to the internet for more information. The German news sites, which don't have the massive infrastructures of networks like CNN or Google, were too overloaded to respond. One of them, in a gesture i'll never forget, shut down all of their normal content and directed all traffic to a single, simple page. The page explained that their web servers had failed under the heavy loads, and that they had decided to solve it by shutting down all other services and directing all requests to *this one page* until the traffic levels once again became manageable enough to return to regular service. The page went on to explain what little was known about the situation in NYC and had one small image of the buildings. It was updated as often as they got new information. As an internet-based programmer, i can tell you that the main technical implication of that decision was that it allowed them to serve 10 or more *times* as many anxious web users than they would normally have been able to. They considered the story important enough that they shut *everything else* down in order to get the word out. On a technical level it was a clever solution to the problem of getting people to the info most of them were looking for. On a social level it was both wise and clever as well as generous.

Discouraged by the internet's first global traffic jam, i grabbed my things and ran for home. i had to pass through Hauptbahnhof - the central station - on the way home. Hundreds of people gathered in the center of the station to watch the single big-screen TV. They speculated amongst themselves, cried, or just stared.

While i don't remember why, and it was out of my way, but i also had to pass near the U.S. Embassy that evening. German armored infantry had surrounded the place, dutifully keeping watch. A middle-aged German woman walked towards one of the young soldiers, a bundle of roses at her side. Unsure of her intentions, he politely stopped her and asked her to step back. She held up the roses so he could see them, and explained that she wanted to leave them at the embassy. The guard was obviously not quite prepared for that response. He looked both slightly ashamed and almost on the verge of tears over her offer. After regaining his composure, he accepted the flowers and told her, "I'll put them right here," as he gently placed them on the steps, making sure to look at her and get her unspoken gesture of approval of where he had put them.

She was the amongst the first of very many Germans to show their sympathies in the forms of visits or demonstrations at the U.S. institutions around the country over the next weeks.

Me, i spent the next week crying in front of the TV, glued to either CNN on TV or news websites the whole time.

The Oktoberfest, which started a week or two later, was empty for the first week. Nobody came. The second week, people trickled back in. It got almost to normal levels of visitors by the end, but it wasn't the same that year.

Let there be *no doubt* that September 11th deeply saddened all of Germany, and the reverberations are still here to this day.