

# Connecting with What Matters Most

(Published August, 2004 by Kathy Paauw, [www.orgcoach.net](http://www.orgcoach.net))

Last month we went to Ukraine to visit our exchange student who lived with us a year ago. Olha's family invited us to be their guests for a week, and we readily accepted the invitation.

We felt very fortunate to experience life in Ukraine with such a wonderful host family during our stay. We spent four nights in Olha's family home in Poltava -- about a four-hour drive from Kiev -- and two nights in Kiev.



*Our daughter Carly, with Olha and Oleg*



*Olha with mom, brother, dad, Carly & me in Kiev*

I'll share some of my impressions here.

**Housing:** Their homes are much smaller than ours. As a result, Ukrainians are very resourceful in their use of space. The rooms in Olha's family flat were multi-purpose – a family room and an office by day became sleeping rooms at night. All of the rooms had a futon-like couch that made into a very comfortable bed each night. Clothing and personal items were cleverly concealed in furniture in each room. Unlike many American homes, Ukrainians tend to buy only what they need or highly value, and they don't waste money or space storing items that will not enhance their lives in some way.

**Economy:** The cost-of-living is much lower, but so is the average salary. We learned how poorly teachers are paid. Olha's friend's mother currently works at a McDonald's (yes, the fast food giant) in England, where she is paid much better than she was paid as a teacher in Ukraine. She is able to send some money back to her family in Poltava to help support them, but she does not get to see her husband and kids more than once or twice a year.

**Communications:** Olha's family pays as much for their monthly phone bill as they do for their monthly mortgage payment for their 3-room flat. We discovered that many people own cell phones. The Internet is very expensive for people to use in Ukraine, as dial-up minutes must be purchased on calling cards, in addition to paying a per-minute cost for using the phone line. No high-speed connection is available, so sending and receiving messages can be quite slow and expensive.

**Health:** Most of the Ukrainian people are thin or of average weight. Although they eat lots of carbs (bread, potatoes, and other starchy foods), they eat smaller portions. They also walk a lot. According to our pedometer, we walked an average of 10 miles per day during our visit. Restaurants were not very popular in the town of Poltava. There were no fast-food restaurants there, although we saw several McDonald's in Kiev. Unlike in the US, food does not seem to be as much of a central focus for entertainment. (Alcoholic beverages are a different story!)

**Education:** We asked Olha and her brother, Oleg, to compare their educational experience in Poltava to the schools they attended for a year in the US, since both of them have been exchange students for a year. They agreed that education is better in Ukraine than in the US. Doing well in school is very important, as grades and aptitude tests determine whether or not you will continue on to college or go into trade school. Higher education becomes a very competitive privilege to receive.

**Language:** Ukrainian and Russian are the languages spoken by most. In Poltava, very few people spoke English. In Kiev we found a few more people who spoke English, but it was still not very common. Olha and her brother speak English very well, and their parents spoke and understood a little. It would have been difficult for us to get around, had we not had Olha and Oleg to translate for us. Everything was in Russian – street and store signs, menus, etc. Even finding our way out of the airport would have been a challenge without a translator.

The impressions I walked away with are generalizations, and I recognize that they do not apply to all Americans or to all Ukrainians, although they apply to many...

**Americans buy way too much stuff!** When we fill our homes with too much, we buy a larger home to contain more stuff, or we rent a storage unit. Ukrainians seem content with what they have. They have enough room and enough possessions to live comfortably, but not extravagantly. They use their space very wisely.

**Americans overeat, and food is a central part of our entertainment.** The American population has weight-related illnesses as a result, such as diabetes and heart disease. Ukrainians enjoy their food, but not to excess.

**Americans rely too much on cars to get around and don't get enough exercise.** (This may possibly relate more specifically to living in the Seattle area, where public transportation is not very good.) In Ukraine we relied on public transportation and we walked a lot. We got a lot more exercise!

**Americans spend too much time with electronic equipment.** We don't tend to interact with people as much, because we interact with so many electronic gizmos – email, computers, electronic games, etc. Ukrainians limit their contact with electronics, and they invest more time interacting with each other.

All of us learned something from experiencing the Ukrainian culture and way of life. Perhaps the best way to summarize what we learned is to share an excerpt from my 17-year-old daughter's journal (shared with her permission).

When we arrived in Kiev and pulled into Olha's home, I was shocked to see the peeling paint on the side of the building that they lived in -- referred to as a flat. The roads nearby were gravel, and there was a field of rusty storage garages adjacent to the flat. They lived on the eighth floor of the flat and we had to take our luggage up in the world's most unreliable elevator. It was about a third the size of a small car and broke down several times a day.



Goats and goat herder in front of the storage garages.

Upon entering the flat, I was a little surprised. During the entire time that Olha lived with our family, I had never once thought about how wealthy Olha's family was. I had also never thought about how different Ukraine's style of living would be. I guess I had just expected that Olha lived in a similar house to ours because she seemed so adjusted to life in the US. What I didn't realize with this mindset was that people from different countries tend to adjust to whatever they have. To them, life isn't measured by how many things they have, but by the quality of their interactions with people and everyday events. That's the way that life should be. On this trip, I realized that America is so full of want and desire for superficial

things and social status, but in Ukraine everything that went on had such substance that I got a gratifying feeling just seeing the happiness in simplicity.

The flat was small, very small -- one level -- 3 bedrooms, one bathroom, and one small kitchen. Each room had a futon that turned into a bed. Olha's room had the TV, so the family basically used it as their living room. What struck me about Olha's family on that first night was how kind and hospitable they were. They gladly gave up their rooms to make room for us with our thousands of pounds of luggage. We really stuck out. Each of us had a huge amount of things that we had brought with us. There was no reason for us to have brought so much; we never even touched most of it during our entire trip.

Looking around their flat on the last day, I realized how much I wanted Olha's life. The small, cute home that their family shared felt so much more personal than most American homes. In each room, I could imagine the family crowding around a simple board game or book and sharing laughs and memories together. I could see them cherishing everything in their homey surroundings because they knew that everything around them was a well-loved item that they were proud of and knew they had earned through hours of hard work.

I appreciate everything I have, but sometimes I just wish that I didn't have it. I love the internet as much as the next person, but I feel like relationships and the connection that people in Ukraine have to each other are much stronger because of their lack of technology. I want that simple life. I want to live in a house with virtually no internet connection, so I can learn how to spend my time in more gratifying ways and become a deeper person. I want to take the bus everywhere and walk for hours on end along the dusty roads, looking at everything that the daily pieces of life have to offer, past the bustling marketplaces and reluctant goats. Everything in Ukraine is personal, every place tells a story, and every person that you pass has a feeling about them, whether it is happy, painful, sad, etc. No one is fake or demanding—what you see is what you get. Rubber time is a way of life. No one gets bent out of shape or uptight about stupid things. Nothing is industrialized. It is not a fake, robotic, metallic world, like ours. It is real and human and refreshing.

It's amazing how much a trip like this can change me. Living in a home with someone in a foreign country is a much richer experience than living in a hotel there. I learned so many things from Olha's family and their way of living. They made me want to be a better person. Of course, I will still have my obsessive spending problems, but I am learning how to save more and how to savor all that I have in my life. When I got home, I immediately went through all of my possessions and gave away about half of everything I had. It made me feel so much better and so much lighter. I don't need all the things I have; I don't even want some of them, so why have them?

As I read my daughter's journal entries from the trip, it reminded me of this quote from Lynne Twist: *"If we let go of what we're trying to get more of, which we really don't need, it frees up reserves of vitality to make a difference with what we have. When you make a difference with what you have, it expands. This applies to love, to time, to relationships -- and, of course, to money. If you sit down and make a difference with the money that you have, you will find that your experience of it expands, and you don't have that focus on scrambling to get more of what you don't really need -- which is what most of us are so busy doing that we don't even notice who we are and what we have. By contrast, the context of sufficiency is making a difference with who you are, what you have, and knowing that it's whole, complete, and exactly enough. It's perfection."*

Jeffrey E. Young and Janet Klasko, authors of *Reinventing Your Life*, suggest that we let go of our need for perfect order, achievement or status in exchange for a higher quality of life and more fulfilling emotional relationships with the people we love.