

Worldview/Culture Interview:

Denys & Natalia

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CS501 – People as Social and Cultural Beings

Denys and Natalia, 34 and 30 years old, respectively, are a married couple who emigrated from Ukraine to the U.S. four years ago. We live in the same apartment complex, so for our interviews we sat outside on the patio for a total of about three and a half hours.

In 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, Denys was forced to leave his business; the only other options were 1. Become Russian, which he didn't want to do, or 2. Stay and pay the price - which could be your life (and for many it was). Around that same time, Natalia and Denys met online. Natalia lived with her mother 1,500 kilometers away from Crimea, so Denys and his mother decided to stay with Natalia and her mother, and they ended up staying for three weeks. (Denys' mother went with him because she had money in a Ukrainian bank that Russia had taken control over, and Natalia had a friend who worked at the bank who could help Denys' mother get her money back.) Natalia and Denys developed a relationship over that time, and Denys ended up staying with Natalia and her mother for a few months. Natalia and Denys decided they wanted to leave Ukraine and try to go to Holland to get involved in the tulip industry there, but Holland had closed its borders to Ukraine; so, a travel agent recommended they try emigrating to the U.S. After a long battle with U.S. immigration, they are here in the U.S. on tourist visas, working hard and trying to build a life for themselves. They eventually want to buy a house and start a family, but struggling to make it day to day is their reality for now. It is difficult adapting to a new culture, not speaking the language fluently (Denys has a better grasp on the English language than Natalia), and being far away from family. Natalia happened to have a few close friends living here in CT, so when they arrived from Ukraine, they had someone to pick them up at the airport. They were also able to have a few close friends at their wedding when they got married here in the U.S.

Coming from a background of his father formerly being in the communist party, where religion is forbidden, and not having a belief in God in his home or going to church, Denys' worldview is that the "big bang" is responsible for creation. He believes the "big bang" set in motion the process of evolution, and that we evolved from apes. The inadvertent implication therein is that life essentially has no meaning. When I challenged him upon this presumption (in a friendly, gentle manner) he agreed that it doesn't make sense that apes haven't been evolving into humans for thousands of years. Denys also shared that recently, as a result of some health issues, his mother is starting to have belief in God and frequently says "thank God." He said with a bit of cynicism something like 'when there is no pain, God is real; when there is pain; there is no God.' Denys has a generally cynical and sarcastic attitude towards God or the concept of God; and he was even worried that he would offend me with his sarcasm (which I assured him he wouldn't). Denys said that he believes that when you die, "the lights go out" and that's it. I believe the hardships in his life, which probably go well beyond the scope of what he shared with me, have created a cynical attitude towards God. It's the typical, universal thought process that goes something like "if God is real, then, where was He?" Denys' suffering and experience of hardship both in the Ukraine and here in the U.S. have shaped his view of God; or the lack thereof. Denys seems to be living in survival mode; just trying to make it from day to day, and hopefully eventually will see the day when he doesn't have to struggle so much. Life is just generally hard for them. It was even harder in Ukraine; he said people have to save money for six months just to buy a pair of sneakers; whereas here, they just go buy them when they want. Denys seems conflicted in that while he appreciates the opportunity to have success and material prosperity here in the U.S., he feels himself getting caught in the "rat race" and losing sight of bigger issues outside of his own life, like global warming, world hunger, etc. In spite of coming

from a culture where everyone wants something in return for something, where there are always strings attached, Denys and Natalia both seem very kind and open, not distrusting and closed. For example, in Ukraine, if you go to the Doctor, instead of just treating you and taking payment, the doctor expects a little something else if you want him or her to keep treating you. There is no system of justice or accountability for actions, and corruption is pervasive, even into the church realm. Denys informed me that priests drive around in fancy cars with lavish lifestyles while everyone else is basically living in poverty. The political corruption is even worse and politicians run cities like their own personal business. Given this cultural background, their kindness and openness is pretty astounding.

Denys and Natalia are both concerned that when they have children, their children won't respect them because they won't speak English as well as their children. They are also even more worried that their children won't respect their parents (children's grandparents) because their parents don't speak any English. They don't want them to be looked down upon. I tried to encourage them that it could actually be the opposite; that their children could have a great appreciation for all of the sacrifices that have been made and for how far they have come and how hard they have worked and struggled to give their children a good life. Natalia and Denys said that in their culture, they are considered "old" and were expected to start having children in their early 20's; so, in that way they are kind of outsiders in their own culture. They have also had very poor experiences with other Ukrainians here in the U.S. For example, when they first moved here, their Ukrainian neighbors, who had been here much longer and weren't doing as well as they were having been here a much shorter amount of time, actually vandalized their property and did other passive-aggressive things, all out of jealousy and spite. So, their one stipulation with a new apartment complex was, no Ukrainians!

¹My worldview differs drastically from Denys', first in the sense that I grew up with a belief in God, and that was foundational for my life. My faith informs my worldview; I believe that God created everything, and that He is sovereign over His creation. Without a belief that God exists, that He is good, all-powerful and in control, nothing is guaranteed, life is one random, meaningless scramble; and you are alone. Rather than having to merely live in survival mode, lacking a sense of purpose, I believe in a good, Creator Father God Who loves us, created us in His image and has a plan and purpose for our lives. I believe He will provide for me, so I don't just have to fend for myself. I know that I am not alone; and that my loving heavenly Father will always be there for me so I can rest in Him. I am not on a hamster wheel, always trying to "make it" or measure up to a certain standard. Another way my worldview differs significantly from Denys' is that I believe in the existence of an afterlife; I believe that I will go to heaven when my earthly tent dissolves. This gives me great hope, knowing this life is not all there is; and that this is actually just the beginning. My worldview is not just based upon trying to make it and surviving from day to day, living only for this life. I am living for another age, for the coming Kingdom that will restore all things and make all things new. My values aren't the values of the world; I value eternal things, the things that God values, which is most of all souls. I am interested in pleasing God and living in a way that honors Him. I know that one day I will give an account for every word and action. This governs how I live. I also know that I have a support system of family and friends and a church community around me.

Given that there is a lack of belief in God, and some cynicism towards the concept of God, to communicate the Gospel to Denys, I would first work to show the genuineness of my

¹ Note: When I initially approached Denys and Natalia about having an interview with them, my last question was "you aren't Christian, right?" (not said in a way that would imply they were wrong or bad if they said no). Natalia answered with her hands up "not really?" Only in our third meeting, when she was available to elaborate upon her worldview, did I learn she actually does have faith in God. So, my paper mostly focuses on Denys, who doesn't (yet) have faith in God.

faith, and to show the love of Christ through my actions. I believe people are looking for something real, and when you have been through so much, it is hard to find people you can trust. I would work to establish a friendship with him and his wife. I would work to earn their trust so that over time, he would eventually be more open to what I have to share. I would demonstrate that I care about them, and I would do this by being a good neighbor, by being, kind, loving, helpful and respectful; just trying to let my light shine, and show the love of Jesus. From that position of relationship, and after sufficient time of praying for him, I would pray for God to create an opportunity to share the Gospel; and that his heart would be open to receive it. (Given the new revelation that his wife actually does believe in God, I will be praying as well for her to lead him to faith in Christ.) I will be praying that God would open his heart to His love, and give him good examples of persons of faith in his life, as all he has had until this point is examples of hypocrisy. I would approach and broach the topic with humility and sincerity. For Denys specifically, because he is my neighbor, (hypothetically) I would invite him and his wife to a meal, either here at the apartment complex or out at a restaurant. If at this point, he hasn't asked leading questions that would open the opportunity for me to share my "story" (testimony), I would ask them if I could share my story (testimony), especially considering how much they have already shared with me. After sharing my testimony, I would then share the Gospel. I would tell Denys that Jesus loves him and cares about him and wants to help him. I would try to communicate to Denys that God is not like all of those other people he has seen who were bad representations; that He is actually the most true, real, faithful, loving Person there is and ever was and ever will be. I believe in this case, as in most, actions speak louder than words.

8/8/2020

11am-12:30pm

Worldview/Culture Interview Part I

I interviewed Natalia and Denys, who are from Ukraine. We live in the same apartment complex. They came here four years ago. In 2014, when Crimea was being annexed by Russia, Denys was given a few options; to either become Russian, get a Russian passport and adopt the language and culture; leave Ukraine and go somewhere else; or remain without a Russian passport and face potential life-threatening consequences (people had disappeared and been found later etc.). Denys was a co-business owner and his business partner accepted the 'Russia-conversion' deal; he gave his portion in the business to his mother who was staying in Ukraine and accepting the deal to become Russian. Russia said that people would have no problem with their finances in the banking systems as it transferred over to Russian control; however people ended up not getting their money back or it took a long time and you had to travel to another part of Ukraine that wasn't controlled by Russia to get it back. He then went with his mother went to stay with Natalia, whom he had recently met online. She lived 1500 kilometers away, far from Crimea and outside of the fighting/annex zone. He and his mother stayed with Natalia and her mother in their house for a few weeks. Natalia's friend worked at a bank and was able to help Denys' mother get her money back. They were looking to leave the Ukraine and first wanted to move to Holland for their Tulip industry but Holland closed their borders as a result of the war and the huge influx of immigrants; so, a travel agent suggested they try moving to the U.S.; thus, began their long battle with U.S. immigration. They were applying for visas and got 10-year multiple tourist visa; it has been hard with immigration, waiting for a meeting to have visa extended/get green card

They got married after they came here, Natalia happened to have a few close friends from Ukraine that live nearby so they had a small wedding with close friends

They both miss their families back home; Natalia's mother hasn't been able to get a visa to come visit :(

It has been generally hard in the U.S. for them because of language and cultural barriers

They feel generally welcomed/accepted by people but still hard with language barrier

When they lived in Stamford, they experienced jealousy from other Ukrainians who were not doing as well financially who had been here for a while; they experienced vandalism etc. so their one stipulation with new apartment complex was no Ukrainians :)

Natalia works as a makeup artist and housekeeper; Denys is a painter

They don't really care about American politics; they see to just care more about surviving day to day; however, they keep abreast of Ukrainian politics

Denys' English is much better than Natalia's; he has been speaking English since he was 15 and took English classes in college; Natalia has a hard time with English and wants to take ESL classes but it's hard to find the time to do so

They are worried that when they have children, they will become irrelevant; kids will know English better than them and essentially be Americans; also worried their children won't have good relationship with/respect for grandparents as grandparents don't speak any English

I was trying to encourage them that rather than *disrespecting* their parents and grandparents; they might have tremendous *respect* for them considering how hard they've worked, how far they've come and how many sacrifices they've made for their children to have a good life

They were very kind and gracious and very willing to open up to me and share their experience.

Natalia was very kind and sweet. My pen rolled off table and she picked it up for me.

12:10pm-1:00pm

Worldview/Culture Interview Part II

In case they were feeling uneasy/uncomfortable about bearing their souls to me, since we don't really know each other, I initially tried to provide some comfort and assurance, 1. By telling them that everything they share stays between us (and my paper) 2. That my professor might have in mind to expose American students (although there are many international/transnational students as well) to other people's background and way of life so they can have an understanding of other people's lives and cultures. In case there was any suspicion (which I don't believe there was) I was trying to remind them of the purpose of the paper wasn't just to interrogate them but there is a purpose behind it, to educate spoiled white kids (just joking) that there is a big world out there and lots of people have very hard lives. I told them the things they shared with me in our first interview, that most Americans cannot even imagine going through those things. I was trying to let the love and compassion of Jesus shine through. And make them feel comfortable opening up to me again.

Denys and Natalia were elaborating for me and filling in details that I missed from our first interview. He was basically describing how it is hard here in the U.S. to care much about else than basically survival; thinking about "global issues" i.e. poverty in Africa, global warming, other global issues etc. becomes a non-issue when you are just trying to make it day to day and think about your own life. He sounded worried that he was basically becoming like Americans who only care about their own lives and don't worry about other people in the world who are suffering. (Natalia had to leave.) I assured him it's normal to think about things of your life; considering buying a house, thinking about those things are important and most people think about those things etc. He seemed comforted/reassured by that thought. He is trying to adjust to a new system and it's difficult. Denys shared that he doesn't like feeling locked into a routine here- in Ukraine they could get away for five days; here he said you have to plan your vacation a year in advance. It feels limiting and is exhausting. As he was speaking my heart went out to him. It's just the daily grind and it's hard. Denys was sharing with me how in Ukraine people treat you however they want; there isn't really a system of justice; for example the only reason Denys' mother was able to get her money back from the bank was because Natalia had a friend who worked at the bank, and even then she had to go multiple times and cajole etc. Denys was explaining that in the Ukraine, even though couples both work full time jobs, they still don't have enough money to live, let alone take vacations. He was saying the government basically is corrupt and people who run cities do it like a personal business and just make money at the expense of everyone else; and there is no accountability. He was saying people have to save money for is months to buy a pair of sneakers.

Then we moved onto more 'philosophical' topics; I asked Denys directly, albeit in a gentle tone, if he believed in God. I believe I developed a level of trust and openness where he could feel comfortable sharing his true thoughts without being judged. He said no; and was elaborating now he believed in Darwin's theory of evolution. We talked about that a little and I shared a few thoughts about that; about the astronomical improbability of DNA coming out of the big bang etc. Just trying to plant a few seeds/thoughts about 'maybe there is a God.' Denys' father was formerly in the communist party and they are not allowed to have religion so he didn't grow up in a believing home. He said his mother is starting to believe in God and says "thank God" to which I joked "listen to your mother." He sounds a little cynical about believing in God

and said he basically doesn't want to offend me by being sarcastic about it. I said he wouldn't offend me. Denys was explaining that even the *church* is corrupt in Ukraine; that the clergy/priests all drive fancy cars etc. while everyone else is basically living in poverty. Denys said his main concerns right now is taking care of people he cares about. I asked Denys (directly-again, I know we weren't supposed to but I felt I had developed a level of trust and they are pretty open) what he believed happens when you die. He said basically poof, you're gone; the light switch goes off and that's it. We chatted a little and basically ended the conversation there. Note: I was having some chocolate and the chocolate was melting in my fingers and I didn't have anything to wipe it with and Denys was eager and ready to run inside to get me a wet nap. They are both very kind.

8/26/2020

5:30-6:30pm

Worldview/Culture Interview Part III

Just me and Natalie met this time. They were away last weekend and are very busy with work so it's hard to pin her down. I wanted to hear her perspective on the deeper, more philosophical worldview aspects. Unlike what she originally told me, I was surprised to learn that Natalie actually *does* have belief in God. Denys implied that she did; but I wasn't sure what to expect when I sat down with her. I don't know why she told me they weren't Christian initially. I was just so pleasantly surprised that she actually believed in God; and that changed the trajectory of the conversation. We talked a lot about God and how in Ukraine, and even in Ukrainian churches here in the U.S., the pastors/priests often come to church drunk (yikes!). She also said that a pastor who lived next to them in Ukraine lived in a house "like the ones in Darien or Greenwich," he drove a very fancy car, and "had women." Not only that but... "those" kind of women (insert horror emoji face). I asked her if her faith in God was ever a source of conflict for her and Denys since he doesn't really believe in God; and she thinks he believes in God but doesn't want to admit it; or has had so many poor examples that it has turned him away. She said it is not at all a source of conflict in their marriage. I took our time together to share a little bit of my testimony and try to encourage her in her faith. They don't go to church as they've only had bad experiences in churches here in the U.S. I was trying to encourage her in the goodness of God, and that it's so great that she knows Him because He is a good provider, and that He loves us so much and satisfies our deepest needs. Not what I was expecting from this meeting but I am glad we have that in common and can double-team her husband! Ha 😊