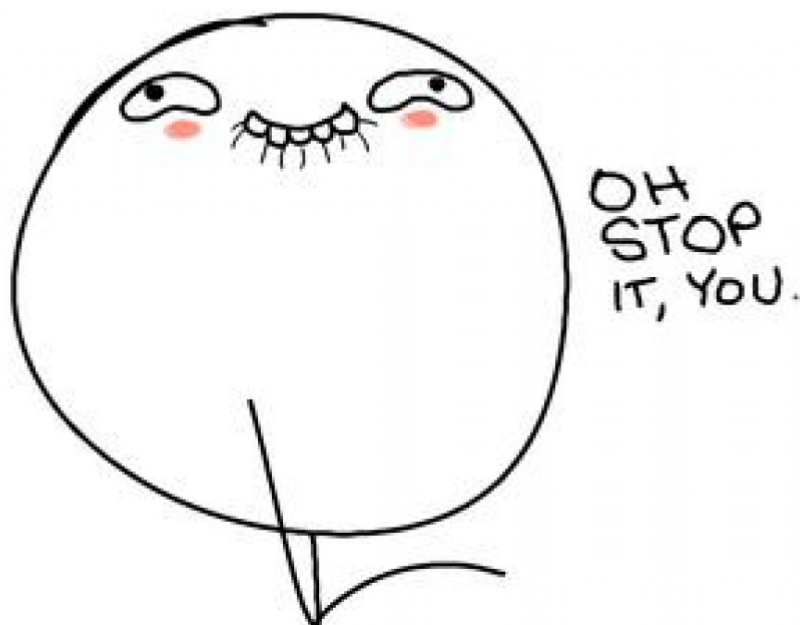


Moderation, Russian-Style

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Умеренность: temperance

Over the years I've paid particular attention to the key words and concepts in Russian culture, since in order to have a hope of fitting in, foreigners need to know not just what a word means, but where it is on the Russian value chart.

That is, you need to know that гордыня is pride, but also that Russians consider it the worst of the семь грехов (the seven sins).

I first started writing about the (Russian) sins, but gave short shrift to добродетели (virtues). Let's face it: good behavior is a snooze.

I did get through усердие (diligence) and смирение (humility), however, and now it's time to consider умеренность (moderation, temperance).

It's a good virtue for January, the month of new fitness club memberships.

In the Russian list of sins and virtues,

умеренность counters обжорство (gluttony) and is sometimes replaced by the stricter воздержание (restraint, abstinence).

I think it's fair to say that умеренность doesn't come easy to Russians, who tend to value big and generous emotions, personalities, appetites, and heck — even novels (Leo Tolstoy, I'm looking at you).

Умеренность is умение человека быть хозяином своих чувств, желаний, влечений (a person's ability to be master of his or her emotions, desires and inclinations). Russians support it on the macro level: Именно умеренность и аккуратность могли бы спасти русскую нацию (Moderation and precision are what's needed to save the Russian nation.) And on the micro-level: Главное для похудения это умеренность и сила воли! (To lose weight you must have moderation and will power!)

But at least some Russians believe that too much temperance is also not a good thing: Человек должен быть умеренным даже в своей умеренности (A person has to be moderate even in moderation.) So have a slice of chocolate cake — but just one.

That said, some people of moderation have a trait that is one of Russian culture's highest values: скромность (modesty). Being modest is a Very Good Thing in Russian culture: Скромность украшает человека (Modesty adorns a person.) A person who is highly successful but modest is highly admirable: Наш профессор принял награждение с благородной скромностью истинного профессионала (Our professor accepted the award with the noble modesty of a true professional.)

In fact, sometimes you don't get ahead in the world by being pushy, but by being modest: Он скромно опускал ресницы, зная, что скромность ему к лицу... "Этот мальчик далеко пойдёт!" говорили про него в детстве. (He modestly lowered his eyes, knowing that modesty made him more attractive. "That boy will go far," people said about him when he was little.)

And the desire to appear modest might even influence speech patterns: Говорить "мы" это признак скромности. (Saying "we" is a sign of modesty.)

But скромность has to be genuine; false modesty is a Bad Thing that must be cast off: Отбросив ложную скромность, можно подчеркнуть, что журнал наш всё же гораздо больше хвалят, чем ругают (Putting aside false modesty, I'd like to stress that our magazine gets more praise than criticism.)

And that Russian tendency to present oneself modestly can be a problem for job seekers in other cultures, like the U.S. As the writer Sergei Dovlatov discovered and wrote: Скромность в Америке не является первоочередной добродетелью. (In America modesty isn't the number one virtue.)

The moral is: when applying for a job, check the country's value system before you write your resume. To be on the safe side, remember: умеренность во всём (moderation in everything).

But have that one slice of cake.

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