

## Proposal

### Discovering Sweden—One Mistake at a Time

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Over several decades Sweden taught me things I once thought impossible. I learned to love high taxes, feel comfortable with socialism, and – despite owning nine rifles – appreciate gun control. Most important, however, Sweden persuaded me to share its teachings with other English speakers in my nonfiction book, *“Discovering Sweden—One Mistake at a Time.”* My book is filled with entertaining anecdotes and insightful analysis that go beyond myths, statistics, and stereotypes to create a greater understanding of both Sweden and the United States.

And we do need greater understanding. The average American knows lots about Sweden: IKEA, socialism, high taxes, and beautiful blondes. But ask an American to find Sweden on a map, and things get complicated. At a presentation to a group of well-educated Americans, I passed out a blank map of Europe. A quarter of my audience could not find Sweden.

What Americans lack in European geography knowledge they make up for with Nordic-inspired political dialog. During the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton claimed to love Denmark while Bernie Sanders proposed a Swedish-style single-payer healthcare system. America’s new president, Donald Trump, after watching a misleading TV report, shouted to the world: “Sweden! Who would have believed it?”

Even if Americans can’t find Sweden on a map, we think we know a lot about it. That’s because stereotypes are easy. Living and experiencing a place—and truly understanding it—is hard.

Like everyone, my ideas about Sweden were once based on a statistic here and a stereotype there, and heavily shaped by my American viewpoint. Over the past 30 years, I’ve discovered Sweden one mistake at a time. My book takes readers on a journey to discover a truer—and sometimes more hilarious—version of Sweden, while learning about America in the process.

I made two kinds of mistakes in Sweden. First, I learned that stereotypes—the things we know about Sweden—aren’t true! Taxes cripplingly high? No. Our income tax bills are the same, and Sweden levies no property taxes. The government runs everything? No. Two-thirds of Sweden’s roads, for example, are managed by those who live along them. You say don’t like the snow plowing? Don’t complain to the government. Call your neighbor and get out your wallet.

What about socialism? I see more of it in the United States than I imagined, and less of it than I expected in Sweden. How about socialized medicine? Sweden shows it’s fast, efficient, and effective. We pay far more for healthcare in the United States and get less. Sex? Swedes consider it normal, not naughty, which is hard for Americans to figure out. Racism? There’s plenty to go around, but the Swedes still accommodated 160,000 refugees in 2015 while America fought about taking 10,000. That’s why my book’s first seven chapters challenge the

stereotypes that keep Americans from understanding Sweden, a place that seems so much like America but isn't.

Then there were truths so wonderful I thought they must be mistakes. Like free college. Like kings and queens. Like hiking anywhere, picking berries, and camping overnight on private land—without permission. Like getting 14 months off from work with pay to take care of your new baby. Like living in a country so trusting that national parks leave axes at picnic sites, and banks make loans for real-estate purchases with simple two-page closing statements. Like having serious gun restrictions while embracing a viable hunting and shooting culture. Like celebrating science and royalty at Nobel Prize banquets.

My book's final two chapters discuss the big question: How did Sweden get this way? I ask the Swedes to explain it, and then I discuss challenges for Sweden and lessons for America.

This is good time to publish a book on Sweden. Besides the ongoing political rhetoric about high taxes and European socialism, two major 400-page footnoted books on the Nordics were recently published by Michael Booth and Anu Partanen. Each sold more than 20,000 copies in the United States.

Equally amazing is that ten publishers came out the past year with easy-to-read lifestyle books using the Swedish word "*Lagom*" in the title. These short books feature pictures, recipes, cartoons and aphorisms, making them much different from Booth and Partanen's tomes. But their sheer number indicates a publishing interest in Sweden. "*Discovering Sweden—One Mistake at a Time*" falls in the middle. Like the "*Lagom*" books, it's short (200 pages) and easy to read. But like Partanen and Booth, it's authoritative.

My popular writings on Sweden get noticed. *Vox* published my chapter on taxes. It generated over 800,000 page views, was acknowledged in the *New York Times*, and was reprinted in America and Sweden (in Swedish).

*Vox* also published my article on what we can learn about gun control from Sweden, and included my suggestion for American hunters to register their guns to demonstrate their well-established responsibility as gun owners. The piece generated over 600,000 reads, and stacks of emails and letters—many positive.

Meanwhile, the Fodors website published my humorous report on six things you must know to survive the Nobel banquet. My article gives a new twist on a magical night.

I also published a perspective on violence in Sweden in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* after Trump's outburst in February 2017, and one titled "Nobel Prizes show strength of US universities" in the *Wisconsin State Journal*.

As a result of these publications, I was profiled in *Dagens Etc.*: "Amerikanen som förälskade sig i svenska skatter." Trans: "The American who fell in love with Swedish Taxes." I have done radio interviews in Canada, Sweden and the United States. I have also given talks on Sweden and served on several panels in the United States. All of these articles (along with this proposal) are available on my website <http://dces.wisc.edu/people/emeritus-faculty/thomas-heberlein/>

By knowing less about Sweden than Swedes, and viewing the country as an outsider, I see things Swedes have trouble appreciating. After reading my *Vox* piece on taxes, a Swedish reader wrote: “Really great essay. When you’ve spent most of your life in Sweden, you mostly notice everything you want to change—but you have really put your finger on many of the good things about Sweden that we almost take for granted! Made me feel rather grateful, actually.”

As a sociologist, I don’t complain about what Swedes do or don’t do. Instead, I enjoy pondering and unraveling what these often tiny differences mean. It took years to learn what mistakes led to the first party I held and why no one showed up. When the explanations came together, they were obvious. I enjoyed a similar journey learning why Swedes watch Donald Duck cartoons on Christmas Eve. And after hunting five days and not seeing a moose, I found the hunters’ coffee-drinking behavior and their reluctance to take pictures more interesting than the hunting.

My last book, “*Navigating Environmental Attitudes*” (Oxford University Press), is an academic book that’s selling far beyond expectations. Its writing has been praised by Amazon readers and in popular reviews like this: “Heberlein’s humor and storytelling skills turn local and international events and behavioral studies into fascinating lessons . . .” I expect I can do the same for Sweden. I owe the country something for tolerating my faux pas with such kindness and grace over the years.

My pitch: Americans (and Brits) continue to be interested in the “Nordic Miracle.” Books in this area are selling. I have developed a platform as someone who understands and interprets Sweden, and I’ve recently published a successful book. I’m seeking a team that can help me get “*Discovering Sweden*” out to the widest possible audience.

## Chapter Summaries

### *Discovering Sweden—One Mistake at a Time*

#### THE MYTHS

##### 1. *It Is What You Know For Sure That Just Isn’t So (Taxes)* <sup>completed</sup>

High taxes are one of the myths about Sweden. By living here we learned our income taxes were about the same as in the United States, and we pay no property tax! Filling out Sweden’s tax form takes 15 minutes. Sweden devotes a higher proportion of its GDP to taxes than we do in the United States, but in return Swedes get free what Americans pay for: healthcare, college and convenient daycare. This chapter expands on the popular article I wrote for *Vox*. *First Person*. April 8, 2016. <http://www.vox.com/2016/4/8/11380356/swedish-taxes-love> (839,000 individual page views) It was reprinted in *Nordstjernen: The Swedish Newspaper of America*. A translation was published in Swedish (*Arbetet*. 5 maj, 2016).

##### 2. *The Nanny State Here And There* <sup>working draft near completion</sup>

Sweden is supposedly socialist, but it’s far more capitalist than Americans imagine. The government forces companies to compete, which often gives consumers more choices at

lower prices. Likewise, America is far more socialist than I realized. The U.S. National Forest Service, the University of Wisconsin (where I worked for 30 years), and hunting and fishing opportunities provided by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources are all socialist systems compared to comparable institutions in Sweden. That knowledge made me understand some good things about the “evils of socialism” in America, and triggered some second thoughts about markets in Sweden—like renting my office at the university while a government-owned corporation profited.

### 3. *Sex and Alcohol* working draft in progress

As one guidebook notes: “Americans treat alcohol like Swedes treat sex and vice-a-versa.” That makes liquor in Sweden hard to come by. It’s sold only in special stores and on certain days. It’s not available in gas stations or grocery stores. Sweden’s liquor stores often advertise drinking water, which is the Swedish version of “Just say no.”

Meanwhile, my Swedish friends think it’s reasonable for 15-year-olds (the age of consent) to host their crushes overnight upstairs! They think it’s smart to pass out condoms after high-school dances. Why? Because teenagers have sex. Unplanned births among Sweden’s teenagers are almost zero. But binge drinking among adults? That’s more of a problem. Many Swedes hide their liquor bottles when heading to recycling sites, and joke that they don’t know where to find the liquor store.

### 4. *Socialized Medicine* working draft near completion

Sweden’s healthcare costs are lower than those paid in the United States, and yet are free to everyone. But what’s it like to visit a doctor in Sweden? Can you choose your doctor? How long must you wait? My experience shows the Swedish system is much more efficient and friendly than Wisconsin’s system, and much cheaper for taxpayers.

### 5. *A Series of Heartbreaks* working draft near completion

Author Bill Bryson describes eating in Sweden as a series of heartbreaks. This chapter explores Bryson’s thesis of bad food and high prices (the heartbreaks), and reports on my efforts to find an American hamburger and anything resembling Mexican food. It ends with advice about bargains that result from migration streams (forever the source of good international food), and some hidden dining places so beautiful and unexpected they break your heart.

### 6. *Immigrants in the Snow* completed

Although millions left Sweden in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the country has seen substantial immigration since the late 1940s. Today, America starts wars and Sweden takes the refugees. During our war in Iraq, more Iraqi immigrants settled in one small town outside Stockholm than in the entire United States. The Swedes give them food, shelter and healthcare, but racism and social structures hinder assimilation. Immigrants bring much with them. As in America, many immigrants work harder than the natives to survive, and send money home. They’re simply glad and grateful to live in peace, with opportunities to advance.

### 7. *Lagom and Swedish Pride* to be drafted

Swedes are modest by reputation, but beneath that appearance burns special pride. Olympic gold is a big deal in Sweden, and even expatriates like me feel proud when watching

Charlotte Kalla overcome a 23-second deficit to win the cross-country skiing relay. At brunch one day Swedish friends and I discussed which animal best described our own countries. I think Americans resemble Labrador retrievers. We're always happy and eager to please, but sometimes jump up on people with our muddy paws. The Swedes? They're Siamese cats peeking out from behind the curtains.

## THE WONDER

### 1. *Trust* (The Ax, the Boat and the Closing Statement) <sup>completed</sup>

This chapter is about living in a society with high levels of trust and my amazement with responsible behavior. At fire pits in public forests, I often find a stack of split wood and an ax. No one attacks other hikers with the ax or chops up the picnic tables. Neither does anyone steal the ax. When forest trails continue to nearby islands, I'll find a small rowboat tied near the trail to take me there. Again, no one sinks the boat, steals it or pinches the oars. Likewise, when buying our apartment, we bid by text messages, not fax. This high level of trust holds Sweden together and makes things efficient. By trusting people to do the right thing, Sweden doesn't need as many rules, checks, and lawyers.

### 2. *Nature Nearby* <sup>working draft near completion</sup>

It's hard to think about Sweden (and most Nordic countries) without thinking about nature. Nature is accessible and part of everyday life for most Swedes. Stockholm, for instance, is one-third water, one-third green space, and one-third buildings and infrastructure. Central Stockholm is an island of buildings surrounded by Eco Park—five times larger than New York's Central Park—and waters of the Baltic Sea and Lake Mälaren. More important than nature's presence is the Swedes' access to it. People have time to enjoy nature. Schools close in a rotation so people can get to the mountains to ski. "No Trespassing" signs don't exist. The public has the right (by tradition and constitution) to walk in, camp one night, build a fire, and gather berries and mushrooms on private lands! And cheap and regular public transit takes you to islands and mountains.

### 3. *Family Values—Seriously!* <sup>to be drafted</sup>

Children are Sweden's collective wealth. They're not just MY kids. When my wife and I first arrived in Sweden for a sabbatical year in 1995, the United States was debating whether a new mother taking leave from work *without pay* should lose her job. Meanwhile, Sweden was debating whether parents (mothers or fathers) should receive 75 or 85 percent pay for a year off to care for newborns. Swedish buses accommodate baby buggies and dip low enough to let carriages (as well as wheel chairs) roll aboard. Further, the baby and person pushing ride free. Low-cost daycare is available for all. Kiddy playgrounds dot central Stockholm. Instead of tax deductions, families receive monthly government checks for each child. By living in Sweden, I learned what "family values" really mean.

### 4. *The Gun, the Dog and the Thermos* <sup>working draft in progress</sup>

If you told a Swede he could go hunting but take only his gun OR thermos, not both, he would struggle choosing. A Wisconsin hunter would laugh. Although hunting is popular in Sweden, its practices reflect cultural values of cooperation, equality, efficiency, and animal

welfare. Hunting and wildlife management/stewardship are more privately controlled (Eeeek! Capitalism!) than in the United States, where it's mostly government-run. Hunting in America reflects our values of competition and individuality. I show how the cultural values of Sweden and the United States spawn different hunting practices. An earlier version of this chapter, "The Gun, the Dog and the Thermos: Culture and Hunting in Sweden and the United States," was published in *Sweden and America*. 13: 24-29. <http://dces.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2013/08/gun-dog-thermos.pdf>

#### 5. *Guns—Rights vs. Responsibilities* working draft near completion

We can learn something from the Swedes by shifting our discussion from gun-owner rights to responsibilities. Sweden takes guns seriously, but also has a vibrant hunting and shooting-sports culture. Only responsible people can have guns. I make some suggestions for what U.S. hunters can do to gain the moral high ground. This chapter expands on my "Sweden May Have the Answer to America's Gun Problems." *Vox*. Aug. 8, 2016.

<https://www.vox.com/2016/8/8/12351824/gun-control-sweden-solution>. (626,000 individual page views)

#### 6. *The Nobel Prizes* working draft in progress

More people have heard of the Nobel Prizes than can find Sweden on a map. This century-old institution makes the Swedes arbiters of good science. For several days each fall the prizes put Sweden on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. The Nobel Prize dinner in Stockholm celebrates science, literature, and Sweden's monarchy. It sets the country's standard for formal entertainment. After watching the Nobel Prize ceremony on TV, I fell in love with the dream of attending. Ten years later, I got my wish. I spent that evening at the ball and, of course, made several irretrievable mistakes.

In this chapter I provide tips on surviving, and enjoying, the Nobel Prize banquet, should you ever be invited. This chapter expands on my Fodors.com article. It discusses the Nobel Prize's history, the Prize winners' experiences in Stockholm, and how Sweden's values keep the country from capitalizing on the Nobel Prize's brand.

#### 7. *The Monarchy* completed

It's fun living in a fairytale land of kings, queens, princes, and princesses. I've watched a royal wedding on TV, attended the king's birthday celebration, and put queen stamps on letters home. I describe the advantages of having a monarch, and Swedish views of the monarchy. Although support for the monarchy is high among the Swedes, but there are 10,000 organized in opposition who make good arguments against it. I am surprised to realize I've become a royalist. I do not advocate reinstating George III in America, but I believe much can be said for a constitutional monarch. As an American, of course, I was ill-prepared for my day spent with the king, and mistakes were made. Still, I learned something about the man and the challenges of being his job.

## REFLECTIONS

### 1. *How Did Sweden Get This Way?* <sup>to be drafted</sup>

When I describe what it's like to live in Sweden my American listeners get wide-eyed. At first they don't believe any society gives everyone five weeks of vacation, nearly free but efficient healthcare, access to nature without a car, and 80 percent pay to care for newborns. Once convinced I'm not lying, they ask the hard question: "How do they do that?" As an outsider, I can't answer that question. So, I've been interviewing Swedish friends and colleagues, and recording their fascinating responses. This could be a standalone article in *The Nation* or the *Atlantic* to help market "*Discovering Sweden.*"

### 2. *Current Challenges/Future Worries* <sup>to be drafted</sup>

Sweden isn't perfect, of course. Swedes can't keep ice and snow off their streets, and so they suffer thousands of broken arms, legs and shoulders every winter. Other injuries and an occasional death occurs when roofs shed ice. Graffiti is skyrocketing in Stockholm. In fact, although I live in a beautiful section of town, all the new "decorating" makes me feel as if I'm living under a Los Angeles viaduct. Begging on the streets is also up, rising from almost zero in 2014. Beggars now stake out regular posts on busy streets. In this "almost nearly perfect" (following Booth) society, I wonder why Sweden can't solve such problems.

More dangerous issues are less visible, such as the decline in trust and a lost sense of community and the pressures of increased diversity. Today twenty percent of the Swedish population was born outside the country. Twice as many as when I first arrive. There is also continued pressure to adopt American values.