Culture shock! A survival guide to customs and etiquette, Chicago

Hargraves, Orin
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THE BIG QUESTION FACING THE NEW ARRIVAL in Chicago is not much different from the one faced by any foreigner new to urban America: what really is going on here? Paradoxically, the experience of culture shock for foreigners in the United States is often quite acute. American culture may be the most exported and in many ways the best known in the world, but the reality of American life is very different from its widely distributed tokens. Popular depictions of American life in movies, music and advertising probably contrast as sharply with the reality as a science fiction novel does with a real trip into outer space: until you are there and can experience the place through all of your senses, you can hardly imagine what it is really like. Most things you have heard or read about the United States may have given you expectations that stand in the way of experiencing the place for what it is. This chapter will not attempt to disabuse you of any notions you may have about American culture, or particularly about life in Chicago; the hands-on experience of the place will accomplish that. But we will look at some of the things you can expect to experience in Chicago, while trying to paint an accurate picture of Chicagoans that may go some way toward explaining why they are the way they are.

ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHICS
In one sense, all big American cities look and feel alike: skyscrapers and traffic are concentrated downtown, the same
stores and restaurants seem to be found everywhere owing to the success of franchising, and people dress more or less the same wherever you go, with seasonal variations. What then makes Chicago different? Why are 8 million people here instead of somewhere else?

Chicago today is a multicultural and multiracial city, similar to nearly all cities in the Western world. It is not as cosmopolitan as many coastal cities and many national capitals, but it still boasts a wide spectrum of national enclaves. A hundred years ago, Chicago was in many senses more cosmopolitan than it is today. Then, 75 per cent of Chicagoans were either foreign-born or first generation Americans; today it is closer to 30 per cent. A breakdown of immigration patterns will bring today's picture into sharper relief.

The foundation of Chicago's early immigrant community was German. At the turn of the 20th century, Germans made up just over 25 per cent of the population, as much as the next three identifiable ethnic groups combined (Irish, Poles and Swedes, in that order). So dominant was the German ethnic group that many advertisements, especially for jobs and houses, appeared in both English and German. By the middle of the century, the numbers were different. Foreign immigration had dwindled to nearly insignificant levels and immigrations and first-generation Chicagoans represented less than 45 per cent of the population. Poles had become the dominant European ethnic group, followed by Germans, Italians, Czechs (Bohemians, as they were then called) and Irish. The largest identifiable ethnic group was African-Americans, who made up more than 15 per cent of the population, a result of migration from the South after the end of World War II.

Ethnicity in Chicago today is more diverse but less pronounced for any single group than it was in the 20th century, with one exception: Latinos, or Hispanics as they are also called. Absent at the turn of the century and comprising less than 1 per cent of the population in 1950, Latinos today are the largest identified ethnic group in Chicagoland, making up more than a quarter of the population, though it must be said that this is partly because the label 'Latino' groups many diverse nationalities; Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans are the main ones.

In broader strokes, Chicago today (or more properly Chicagoland, since the figures take in all of the metropolitan area) is 72 per cent white, 19 per cent black, and less than 0.5 per cent each of Native American and Asian. A majority of Chicagoland residents still identify themselves with their ethnic origin. After the Latinos, Germans remain the biggest group, followed by Irish, Poles, Italians, Czechs, English, Swedes and Russians. Of today's Chicagoans, 22 per cent were foreign-born.

It is perhaps ironic that people descended from the largest single European ethnic strain in Chicago today are the group that is least likely to be identified as an ethnic group: the Germans. This is partly because those of German stock have integrated themselves into the fabric of Chicago so thoroughly as to lose a sense of separateness. Another significant factor in the 'erasing' of German heritage was the effect of the two World Wars, both of which made it advisable to be obviously German or to extol German culture. As a result of
the wars, German language virtually disappeared from use in Chicago by the mid-20th century. Other European groups maintain a more visible ethnic identity, especially the Poles (Chicago has more Poles than any other city except Warsaw) and to a lesser extent the Irish and Italians.

Chicagoland today is still a primary destination for immigrants to the United States. Among American cities, it ranks fourth (after New York, Los Angeles and Miami) as a destination for immigrants, with the majority of arrivals (four in five) coming from Mexico, Poland and India, in that order. The most recent statistics available show that about 40,000 foreigners obtain legal residence in Chicagoland each year. The majority of newcomers today join family members who are already here and who came in the previous generation or perhaps only a few years ago. Chicago remains the cultural and ethnic mélange that it has been historically, with slightly different ingredients.
Wrigley Field is the home ballpark of the Chicago Cubs. It has also served as a popular concert venue in recent years.
The Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park was designed by architect Frank Gehry. The Pavilion is home to the Grant Park Symphony Orchestra and the Grant Park Music Festival.
Located adjacent to Lake Michigan, Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry has seen more than 175 million visitors enter its doors. Popular exhibits include a working coal mine and a German submarine captured during World War II.
RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Some form of Christianity, even if it is only rudimentary beliefs, holds a place in the spiritual life of most Chicagoans. Christian values, even if not openly professed, underlie much of civil life, values and manners. A belief in God, even if a very naïve and unexamined one, is the rule rather than the exception for Chicagoans, as it is for most Americans. But this is considerably less true than it was 50 years ago, as more and more people embrace a religion they have found, or no religion at all, rather than the one they grew up with.

In concert with the American way of accentuating the personality and the individual, religion (so-called) may be experienced and practised by Chicagoans not so much as a spiritual path but as a public statement about who they are, or a compatible accessory of their lifestyle. This is not to suggest that genuine spiritual growth, development and experience, together with an integrated system of morality that guides personal choice, is absent from the life of Chicagoans. Rather it means that you should not be surprised to discover that these noble and traditional components of religious life are not necessarily what is offered by the organised and most visible religious bodies in Chicagoland. They are dependent for support on the public and have adapted with the times to give the people what they want.

Many cultures and countries with a majority of people who adhere to one religion hold that religion as a rallying point, a place for common ground among all the people. This is not the case with Christianity in the United States, despite the fact that so many Americans profess to be Christians. There has been a tendency from the beginning in America to separate religion from other aspects of life, especially from government, and that tendency continues today. Religion is something that people often pursue in their leisure time, but most Americans feel that it is not something you should bring with you to work or school. People who proselytise or even speak openly about their beliefs or religious experiences often get a frosty reception—though this does not stop them.

Because of the large number of different Christian sects and denominations, and because the Bible is subject to so
many differing interpretations, there are greater and more visible divisions within Christianity than between Christianity and other religions practised in Chicago. The biggest division today is between what many people call the 'religious right'—fundamentalist Christian sects that actively oppose abortion and homosexuality, among other targets—and more liberal and tolerant forms of Christianity that emphasise the Bible’s teachings of love and tolerance, rather than using it as a sort of battering weapon.

The old ethnic groups in Chicago were primarily Europeans from Catholic counties, and today Catholics outnumber Protestants in the Chicago area about two to one. There are fewer Catholic than Protestant churches, but the Catholic churches are bigger. The Protestant scene is dominated by Lutherans (the German influence), but there are significant numbers of other mainline Protestant denominations, such as Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans, who are called Episcopalians in the United States. Baptist congregations have

a strong following in black communities where 'storefront' churches—those without a purpose-built sanctuary, usually under the leadership of charismatic and emotional evangelists—are also popular.

Muslims, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Jews of all expressions and Buddhists representing all the various schools are all present in Chicagoland—at least 100,000 of each. Chicago is the world headquarters of the Black Muslims, officially called the Nation of Islam, a Western adaptation of Islam with a very strong following in Chicago's black community. Immigrant Muslims from the subcontinent and the Middle East largely eschew this Western version of their religion and build their own mosques in areas where their populations are concentrated.

LANGUAGE
American English is the predominant language of Chicago, but there are pockets in the city where other languages will serve you much better than English. The main contender is Spanish, which is well enough established to be considered a semi-official second language. Many public notices appear in Spanish and English, and Spanish-language advertising is common on billboards in some areas of the city, as well as on public transportation. Other areas of the city with ethnic groups that use their own language are:

- the North-west side along Milwaukee Avenue, where Polish will serve you better than English.
- Chinatown and Argyle Street (5000 N), where Chinese (and to a lesser extent, Vietnamese on Argyle Street) does the job.
- Pockets of Devon Avenue and in Evanston, where Russian is gaining a foothold.

The English spoken in Chicago is very standard as American English goes; people in the Midwest speak with an accent that most people around the world would readily identify as an American accent. A small and probably disappearing variety of speech that might be called a Chicago accent can still be heard in some white working-class areas of the city, such as the South-west Side. Its most identifiable
characteristic is the substitution of 'd' for the 'th' sound in words such as 'this' and 'that.' The late mayor Richard J Daley was a natural with the native Chicago accent; his son, the mayor till 2011, shows vestiges of it.

ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN
People who know Americans only through their representation in television and movies are very likely to have a bizarre notion of what relations between the sexes are really like. You have to remember that in the absence of knowing Americans on a day-to-day, mundane basis, you may well have absorbed information about their behaviour toward each other through the prism of your own culture, which distorts the picture to some degree; and if the picture came from movies and television, it was probably not too accurate in the first place. So for a few moments, forget everything you think you know or may have heard about men and women in American cities. Here are a few points about the modern urban American man and woman that might help you to understand them better.

The word that is supposed to define and direct relations between American men and women today is equality. This causes ongoing but not necessarily problematic tension, because relations are not on an equal basis in many situations and probably never will be in some. In all situations in which a law of any kind applies, equality is supposed to be the rule: women are supposed to be granted the same rights, opportunities and protection as men in employment and education, for example. But women are not routinely treated equally; they often have to assert themselves to keep from being discriminated against, especially in the workplace.

While women expect equal treatment under the law, both men and women are comfortable with a more traditional assignment of roles that leaves some room for chivalry, good manners and recognition of men as protectors of women. Men still (thought much less frequently than in the past) open doors for women, and (with even less frequency) yield a seat to them on public transportation, especially to an older, pregnant or heavily-laden woman. But it is not out of place for a woman to do these same things for a man when there is a reason for it.

In matters concerning romance, men still take a more active role than women, in that they more typically initiate, plan and pay for 'dates', or romantic outings for two people. But it is important to be aware that relations between men and women in American cities are very open and friendly in comparison with standards that prevail in most parts of the world. It is possible and common for men and women to socialise without there being any suggestion of greater intimacy between them. And it is possible for them to be intimate without any implication that they are making some kind of lifelong commitment to each other. These patterns can prove a stumbling block for men from more traditional cultures, who may think that an American woman is 'coming on' to them, or indicating her availability for romance, when in fact she is just being friendly and enjoying herself, and not making any kind of statement about romance whatever.

By the same token, women coming to Chicagoland from cultures where they traditionally take a subservient, submissive or passive role may experience difficulties adjusting to American expectations of them. Here you are
expected to stand up for yourself and have your own opinions about everything. There may be a temptation to perceive American men and women as brash, aggressive and even rude, but by American standards they are probably none of these; they are simply treating you as they treat everyone, as an equal.

There is probably no single area of human relations where rules are less transportable between cultures than in the area of relations between the sexes. The upshot of this is that you can’t really assume that you know what’s going on between men and women in Chicago based on their behaviour toward each other. And you may not have, at least at first, a very good idea of what their intentions are toward you. To the extent that you are able then, it pays to take a backseat initially, observe what you can and find a confidante of the same sex if possible who can shed light on any confusions that may arise for you about what men and women are doing.

Men and Men, Women and Women
As a complicating factor in this sensitive area, gay people are increasingly accepted in most areas of modern urban life on an equal footing with ‘straight’ people. You are very likely to meet with openly gay people where you work or study, and you may meet same-sex couples at parties or through other friends of yours. It is also common for gay men to have as their good friends straight women (single or married), though it is rare for gay women to associate much on a friendly basis with straight men.

These arrangements fly in the face of established decorum in most parts of the world, and indeed in many parts of the United States. American cities are a magnet for gay people who seek acceptance that they cannot find in smaller towns and rural areas, which are a great deal more conservative and traditional. Chicago is the biggest city between the coasts, so it has a large, active and very visible gay population. City government has traditionally been very cooperative with the gay community, and many candidates for public office have openly courted the gay vote, recognising that it is very influential in many parts of the city.

STAGES OF LIFE
Urban Americans progress through the same stages of life recognised everywhere, but may give them different emphasis, owing to demographic patterns and cultural values. If there is a uniquely American pattern in the progress from cradle to grave, it is probably the extent to which institutions outside the family are involved in the development and care of the individual, and the ongoing emphasis on individuality and self-improvement that begins in early childhood and never stops.

Babies and young children hold the same special place in the hearts of Chicagoans that they do the world over. The fact that Americans often wait until they are well into their thirties before having children, and the fact that they may turn the children over to the care of professionals while they are still in diapers (because both parents work), could lead you to think that parenthood is just a kind of sideline. You will see with experience of Americans that it is not. Chicagoans are as emotionally invested in their children as parents everywhere.

With the onset of adolescence, a fully-fledged type emerges.
Because children are held to be so precious and because in large cities there is no sense of community that unites people not already known to each other, you may notice a tendency for parents to be overprotective of their children and suspicious of any stranger's interaction with them. Behaviour toward other people's children that in your own culture would be seen as friendly, innocent or well intentioned may be perceived as threatening or suspect here. For that reason, it is probably good advice not to intervene in the affairs of children who don't belong to you in any way, unless invited to do so by a parent.

The American teenager is the focus of numerous sociological studies, millions of dollars in advertising, and untold hours of angst on the part of parents who wonder whatever happened to their little darlings. The teenage years are normally seen as years of rebellion on the part of youngsters, and of challenge on the part of parents who have to deal with their children's growing autonomy and exposure to the temptations of sex and drugs. Parents from other cultures must be ready to face challenges about raising teenagers in America that were probably not part of the picture at home.

Generational Types

There are at present three generational groups of adults in America that are recognised as units of a sort. The term Generation X refers to people born after 1965, perhaps up to 1980 or so, who are now young adults. This generation grew up in an era of diminished expectations and may in many cases end up being less well-off economically than their parents, or so we are told. Look around and judge for yourself! The generation ahead of them are the baby boomers, the biggest demographic bulge in the United States, who were born between 1946 and 1958, although the cutoff is never quite distinct. Baby boomers, who are now in their 40s to 50s, have the most economic and political influence of any identifiable group and are viewed as the group for whose convenience everything is organised. As this group ages and enters retirement, it is expected to be their needs that drive economic policy in many important respects.

People over the age of about 60 are called seniors, or senior citizens. They are afforded many economic concessions by various businesses, in housing, in medical care and on public transportation, but in general they are not afforded the respect that comes naturally with old age in many cultures. Elderly people who are no longer able to take care of themselves independently may live in an ‘assisted living’ facility, where some of their daily needs are taken care of by visiting professional, or they may be moved to nursing homes. It is usually not the rule for people to care for elderly parents at home, though it is still fairly common in ethnic and immigrant communities.

Got a Problem? See a Professional!

Americans move around a great deal in their lives, and many eventually migrate to cities, where jobs—especially for educated people—are concentrated. This often means that people live quite a distance from members of their immediate family, who in many other cultures normally provide the individual’s primary support network. A phenomenon related to this—as well as to the high degree of individuality, personal independence and personal freedom among urban Americans—is the relatively large number of people who participate in some kind of therapy or self-help programme. Since so many urban Americans undergo psychotherapy or some other kind of therapy at some point
Getting Help

A surprising number of children and adolescents may also receive counselling from professionals outside the family at some point, especially if they are having difficulties in school or cause disruption there. A whole industry exists now to maintain children on prescription drugs of various kinds that are supposed to make them more socially cohesive.

In their adult lives, there is very little stigma attached to doing so. Many people talk about their experiences in therapy openly; it is often seen as a positive step that a person is taking to try to improve his or her life. A less openly talked about aspect of the therapeutic experience, but one that is fairly common, is the use of prescription drugs to treat depression, anxiety, sleep disorders and other ailments that seem to go hand-in-hand with modern city life.

A more community-based approach to dealing with personal problems is a recovery programme, sometimes called a 12-step programme. These programmes, mostly modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous, start from the premise that individuals, try as they might, are unable to willfully free themselves from addictive, self-destructive behaviour of various sorts, such as overeating, drinking too much, dependence on drugs, dependence on sex and the like. The programmes guide people to better self-understanding through spirituality. People participating in the programmes attend frequent meetings, typically held in church community rooms, and talk about their problems and progress in dealing with them. There is a whole dialect unique to these programmes that is foreign to anyone who does not participate, but some of its terms are creeping into the mainstream, such as being in denial, codependency, higher power and recovery. The premises and methods of these programmes are deeply rooted in American culture and may be confusing and off-putting to someone coming from abroad, but on the other hand, they are surefire ways to meet people!

THE PLACE OF RACE AND CLASS

Historically, Chicago has been one of the most racially divided cities in the United States. The problem has not gone away, though it can confidently be said that racial divisions are less important and prominent today than they have been at any time in the past. ‘White flight’—a phenomenon that began nearly half a century ago when white people left neighbourhoods that blacks were moving into—has slowed to its lowest level in decades. Neighbourhoods that are experiencing the greatest racial change now are those where middle-class whites leave to be replaced by middle-class blacks. Those interested in the details of racial politics in Chicago can find dozens of book-length treatments. The concern here is only to give a picture of how Chicagoans generally perceive race today, and how that might affect you if you are a member of a group that has traditionally been identified as a minority race.

Institutionalized racism—where the policies and practices of institutions are actually based on preferential treatment of some people according to their race—does not officially exist anymore, and numerous laws are in place to insure that it doesn’t. But institutions are the product of history and the people who perpetuate them, and so this means that de facto racism survives in institutions dominated by people whose minds are rooted in the past. Your encounter with issues of race will nearly always be at the individual, face-to-face level, but this individual may be representing an institution.

How might you be perceived? The biggest and rather crude boxes that Chicagoans are likely to sort people in, based on appearances and speech, are

- black—people of sub-Saharan African descent, and including African Americans who are the descendants of slaves in the US from the 17th to the 19th centuries.
- Latino—people whose first language is Spanish and whose ancestry is from one of the Spanish-speaking countries or areas of the New World, which in Chicago usually means Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Central Americans. Note that people from Spain are normally thought of as Europeans, not as Latinos.
- Middle Eastern—people from the Arabian peninsula, North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The less-
informed term for these is ‘Arab’.

- **Indians**—people who appear to be from the subcontinent, that is, from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. People who don’t fall into one of these appearance-based categories and who do not have dark skin fall into the value-free category of ‘white’.

For some people, these categories are just for convenience and do not carry any prejudicial associations; other may have well-defined but probably inaccurate stereotypes to go with each sort of person. A few people, especially those less educated or in some way disadvantaged, may perceive any individual only through the distorting and negative prism of prejudicial attitudes based on category. You will meet Americans that exhibit each of these characteristics.

The experience of black Americans, now often called African-Americans, and their place in urban American society cannot go unremarked because this group is still such a long way from attaining equality. Many laws and programmes exist to aid American blacks and ensure that they don’t suffer discriminator, but in fact they are still highly discriminated against in many quarters. People of black African descent from other parts of the world who settle in Chicago are often confused and bewildered by the treatment they receive, especially if they come from a country with a black majority population, or a country where blacks enjoy equality with other identified racial groups. It has to be understood that the legacy of slavery and the premise of racial inferiority that enabled it to exist will require many more generations to reach its end in the United States. Slavery flourished in North America for more than 300 years; it was abolished just over 150 years ago.

Class is a matter far more subtle and ambiguous in American society than the matter of race. There are those who argue that Americans have no class system at all, while others insist that American culture is riddled with class distinctions. We will not intervene deeply in the dispute but only make a few observations. First of all, money talks in America. Making money is a sign of success and economic success opens just about any apparently closed door. In effect, a person’s background does not limit his or her potential to rise within the socio-economic system; only his or her abilities impose any limits. Secondly, the uniform education system across the United States means that practically everyone, except the minorities who are very poor or very rich, shares a similar cultural background; they all grow up studying similar books, watching the same television programmes and engaging in many of the same activities. This tends to minimise class distinctions within the broad mainstream that thinks of itself as middle-class. Thirdly, Americans have always been self-reliant do-to-yourselfers. Apart from the very exceptional case of slavery, there has never existed a servant underclass in the United States. As a result, Americans don’t know any of the many behaviours that exist in other cultures for ‘keeping people behind the facade’.

The upshot of all this is that class is not a subject that occupies urban Americans very much, or that enters much into their conversation. People who find the most to say about class distinctions among Americans are usually those who have developed their awareness of it somewhere else, in a culture where it is considerably more prominent.
in their place'. This is why Americans are apt to be familiar and friendly with all the people they deal with and to treat everyone as an equal; the manner you assume with your barber needn’t be any different from the one you assume with your stockbroker.

CRACKING THE AMERICAN NUT

So far we have painted a broad picture of Chicagoans, but there is still the tougher question: why do these people act the way they do and say the things they say? You will very likely spend a lot of your early time in Chicago trying to deconstruct the behaviour of your new American friends and colleagues and search for hidden meaning in what they say and do. This can be a profitable activity if you know a few of their rules and values, but if you try to interpret Chicagoans’ behaviour according to the rules of your own culture, you could very well end up way off the track. We will therefore conclude this chapter by trying to give some shape to the psyche of the typical Midwestern urban American, with the proviso that this is also necessarily a very broad picture and cannot attempt to explain a given individual. At best, it can provide you with a few tools to help you understand what motivates the natives. The observations are organised around common American idioms that tell us a lot about the way Americans think.

Tell It Like It Is

To a degree that people from many parts of the world find shocking and confusing, Americans like to be direct. ‘Tell it like it is’ means just say what you mean without adding or subtracting anything; don’t try to give an appearance of something that is not true. Another idiom with similar meaning is ‘be straight’. When you are straight with someone, you tell them exactly what’s going on, without trying to be subtle, devious or deceptive. Being straight and telling it like it is are both admirable things in the American system of values. This does not mean that people don’t tell lies or try to communicate something indirectly, but you should know from the outset that a lot of attempts at subtlety with Americans will be a complete waste of time. They won’t have a clue what you’re trying to communicate. You will find relations much easier if you do it the American way—just say what you mean.

By the same token, you will have to develop a tolerance for being dealt with directly: being told in a few words, for example, that some work you have done is not quite what was wanted, or being given a simple ‘no’ to a suggestion of yours for which you might have expected more discussion. No rudeness is intended; this is just the American way.

Get Things Done

Another idiom that crops up in many areas of American life is the phrase ‘get things done’. It means to accomplish things, to finish things that you have started. Someone who has a ‘get-things-done attitude’ is viewed positively as a person of action, a person who can be successful. Americans don’t like settling for a situation that is less than satisfactory, and they don’t like ‘muddling through’, even though life requires us to do so frequently. A problem to an American is something that requires a solution, not something to be tolerated. So you shouldn’t be surprised at the impatience Americans may express about something that you find perfectly tolerable.
or would simply choose to ignore until it goes away. The American approach lies more on the side of doing something about it, rather than letting it do something to you!

**Pick Yourself Up by the Bootstraps**

Consistent with the previous points is the idea that your success depends, to a large degree, on your own efforts. Americans like to think, and in many respects it is probably true, that any American child could grow up to be president of the United States. It is undeniable that an individual's success or failure in life is influenced by a great number of factors beyond the individual's control, but the American tendency is to give little attention to these matters (since there is nothing you can do about them anyway) and to focus on what you can do. An implication of this view is that the individual is the creator of his own condition. This gives rise to the social mobility that we already noted: there is nothing to hold the individual back from attaining much more status, wealth, education and the like than his or her parents had.

You may also occasionally meet people who have squandered the advantages they were born with and who are living a life considerably less comfortable than the one enjoyed by their parents or siblings. While many external factors may contribute to this phenomenon as well, the popular American view is that people simply make the wrong choices—in their marriage for example or in their failure to apply themselves—and so fail of their own accord. Americans don't necessarily feel a duty to 'rescue' a member of their family who has fallen on hard times.

Viewing the world this way wouldn't last long without an inherent optimism, and that is also very much a feature of American thinking. People like to believe, and very often say, that things will work out for the best. A Hollywood movie that doesn't have a happy, even a triumphant, ending runs a serious risk of being a box-office flop, because Americans like happy endings.

**Let It All Hang Out**

American English has a popular idiom that says 'let it all hang out', which loosely means 'be completely free, natural and uninhibited; express whatever you have to express'. While such a notion might strike terror in the hearts of people from gentler cultures, letting it all hang out, in most contexts, is something that most Americans would view as a positive or admirable thing. This points to a central tenet in American culture: personal freedom and individuality have intrinsic value, and you have a responsibility to 'be somebody', to cultivate your own personal likes and dislikes in order to distinguish yourself from others.

There is certainly scope in a larger analysis to talk about whether this is a good thing or not, but that is not our purpose here. We simply want to note that this is a fact about modern Americans that helps explain their behavior in many situations. You may wonder why a perfect stranger, such as a perfect stranger, such as the need to be alone. It is very common for unmarried people to live alone and to spend a great deal of time alone. If you come from a culture that places more value on companionship and cultivating interpersonal relationships, you may have to check a tendency in yourself to rescue an American from spending time alone. Unless you have a lot of evidence to the contrary, chances are that Americans you know are spending time alone because they like to. The 'one-person household' constitutes nearly a third of all households in Chicago.
Strut Your Stuff
The idiom ‘strut your stuff’ means to show off what you do well, to demonstrate your (hopefully unique) abilities in some way. It perhaps epitomises more than all others the fondness of Americans—some would even call it compulsion—to distinguish themselves from others, to stand out from the crowd for some achievement or characteristic, however small. Foreigners often remark on the tireless ability of Americans to talk about themselves and the minutiae of their personal experiences, especially regarding their likes and dislikes, comforts and discomforts, or victories and defeats. From the perspective of another culture, this often appears as loud, crass and boorish, and it is the thing that so easily distinguishes groups of Americans when they are abroad. It is a challenge to try to understand this sort of behaviour within the context of American culture, where it is not remarkable or calculated to achieve some effect; it is just normal. Everybody has to be somebody, and the way to do it is to speak and behave in a way that illustrates your uniqueness.

'I have struck a city—a real city—and they call it Chicago....
I urgently desire never to see it again.
It is inhabited by savages.'
—Rudyard Kipling