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Failure of culture to accept people of all backgrounds mystifying

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 2, 2013 A small c catholic
Libertyville, Ill.

This is the fourth time in my career I've datelined out of either Libertyville or its next-door neighbor, Mundelein.

For personal reasons, I keep track of cities from which I've written, and to date, I have 259 on the alphabetical list, which runs from Abiquiu, N.M., through Woodward, Okla., with such places as Cana, Israel; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Mitchell, S.D., in between.

I'm here visiting my sister and her family for a few days after attending my high school reunion in Woodstock, Ill., an hour or so west of here. But in recalling other datelines from this area, I remember a story I did about a young Catholic seminarian who was taking classes at the University of St. Mary of the Lake, or Mundelein Seminary. I came and spent time with him there, trying to help readers understand why a bright young man would enter the priesthood at a time when, because of the sex abuse scandal, priests often were viewed with suspicion.

With each dateline on my list, I can recall (usually) some story or column I wrote in which I shared with readers something I had learned about the human condition and the global population's astonishing diversity. The ability to travel has been one benefit of a life in journalism, and I recognize that as a gift.

Recently, I've been going through old correspondence from my late parents and just found a letter in which my mother, born in 1913 to Swedish immigrants in north central Illinois, says she was 18 years old before she left Illinois -- and that was for a brief jaunt to Wisconsin.

Later in life, she and the rest of our family traveled around the world and even lived in India for two years, but until she was a young adult, her world was limited to perhaps 50 miles of Streator, Ill.

Today, travel is astonishingly commonplace. Worldwide, airlines carried 2.8 billion passengers in 2011, and that number is expected to rise [1] to 3.6 billion by 2016.

But what baffles me is why this familiarity often breeds contempt, why xenophobia and other fear-based hatreds continue.

A good example was the spiteful reaction [2] to a woman of Indian origin being named Miss America recently. Cyberspace filled up with racial epithets and odious descriptions of her -- some mislabeling her an Arab, as if being an Arab were evil. It was shameful.

How does this happen in a world that's one-third Christian, in a world containing some 1.5 billion Muslims or more? All these people are allegedly followers of a God of love and justice.

The Quran, for instance, in 49:13, quotes God as saying, "We created you ... and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another" (in other translations, "know one another"). The clear implication is

that human diversity is deeply woven into God's plan of creation and we should respect and honor people of other "races and tribes." Other great religions offer similar teachings.

And yet even American history is full of racism, slavery and hate. Yes, we're better than we used to be about this (in many ways thanks to the exposure travel has given us), and today, a nationally recognized politician would be dismissed as a sick crank if he said what Sen. Stephen A. Douglas said in 1858 at one of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates: "I believe (government) was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men of European birth and descent ... I do not believe that the Almighty ever intended the Negro to be the equal of the white man."

But how is blasting Miss America with racial epithets really different from that? And why haven't people of faith created a culture in which such garbage is simply unacceptable? I'm mystified by our failure.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [3] for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [4]*. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com [5].]

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