

Traveling Companion: Profiled at Super Wal-Mart

Fr. Michael Tracey

On Saturday morning, I went to Super Wal-Mart to get one item. I went to the aisle; picked it up and looked for an open checkout aisle. I paid for the item in cash. The clerk handed me my change, nestled on top of my receipt. I headed for the door, convinced that I had done my shopping in record time.

Then it happened. A middle aged lady, in the usual Wal-Mart blue, stopped me. She never said a word. She took my bag from me. She opened it, took out the receipt. Then she reached into a nearby empty shopping cart and picked up a clip-board. She began to write down some numbers on a page in the clip-board. Then she removed the item I had just purchased from the bag and began to examine it. She found the bar code number and began to write it down on the page in the clip-board. Next, she searched the now empty bag to see if I had any other items in it. Obviously I didn't but that did not satisfy her. She did a hand search but came up empty. Finally, she put the item I had purchased into the bag along with its receipt and handed the bag back to me.

Initially, I thought I would have heard some siren going off that alerted her to my purchase and presence. I expected to see some plain clothes Wal-Mart employees arrive at any moment and wrestle me off to some hidden interrogation room.

What really aggravated me was that the lady never said a word during the whole encounter. She never said "Please." She never indicated why she was doing what she was doing. At the end, she never said, "Thank you."

In contrast, a month earlier, I checked in at Gulfport airport for a flight that would take me on vacation. Following the check in, the security gentleman asked me to place my suitcase on a table, and, with a white wand type instrument, he weaved it over the zipper. Then, he asked permission to open the suitcase and, with white gloves, he moved through my packed suitcase. He mentioned that I knew how to pack a suitcase. I told him that I had plenty of years of practice. With the hands of surgeon, he gingerly made sure all items were allowed back in their place. Then, he said he would make sure my suitcase would be placed on the carousel for loading on the plane. I continued on my journey, trusting in his professionalism and courtesy.

When I arrived at my final destination and opened my suitcase, I was surprised to see a note. Most of the official note dealt with the need for security and professionalism in carrying out their security task in order to protect the flying public. At the bottom of the note, the security gentleman had written a thank you for my cooperation and signed his name.

We live in an age that is security-conscious because of recent terrorist's experiences and threats. Obviously, the flying public needs to feel safe and secure in their travels. They are willing to endure a certain amount of security measures in order to be protected during their travels. Some have indicated that this need for such security often brings a profiling of individuals which is often done because of one's nationality, gender, age as well as being a lone traveler.

How do we find a balance between protection and privacy, between profiling and judgments, between discrimination and discernment? The answers, if possible, are complex but if those involved in such security conscious jobs exhibited a little more humanness, a lot more communication, as well as a healthy dose of courtesy, then life would be more secure, less tension-filled and more palatable for all of us.

Will I be back again at Super Wal-Mart, I doubt it. I will find a store that is more, super friendly and purchase what I need there. In the meantime, when I need the same item again, I will gladly go to one of my favorite stores, Office Depot, to buy it with a smile and a welcome.