

## **Traveling Companion: How do you spell “Mississippi?”**

Fr. Michael Tracey

I filled out my Customs form, got my passport and other documents ready for the Immigration Officer at Shannon airport, Ireland, on my return from vacation. The waiting line was an express lane so I whizzed by to the next available inspector. I approached the glass enclosure that housed a middle aged, officer surrounded by the tools of his profession. In front, sat a computer camera, an inked pad to fingerprint first time visitors to the United States. Inside, stood a laptop and a small scanner that scanned resident cards.

I presented my papers and waited while the inspector reviewed them. Then he asked, “Where do you live in the United States?” I told him, “Mississippi.” Then, he asked, “How do you spell ‘Mississippi?’” Jokingly, I said, you just put enough s’s and p’s in the right places and you can spell it.” I sensed he didn’t seem amused, even though I slight smile brushed across his face. I decided to spell Mississippi for him. Obviously, I spelt it correctly. Then, he said, “You might wonder why I asked you to spell ‘Mississippi?’” He went on to explain, “Some time ago, someone came through here and I asked them where they were going in the States, and they said, ‘Mississippi.’ Then I asked them to spell ‘Mississippi.’ They couldn’t spell it. They got all mixed up. I told him that I had no such trouble spelling ‘Mississippi.’ I had over thirty-five years of practice. Then he handed me my papers as well as a stamped Customs Card and wished me a safe flight back to Mississippi.

Almost eight hours later, my flight landed in Newark airport in New Jersey. As I waited at the baggage claim carousel to collect my luggage and transfer it to my next flight, I read the welcoming guidelines from the Immigration and Border Control that was posted prominently in the middle of the carousel. It mentioned such things as their respect for the individual, their rights, welcomed their opinions and comments as well as treating them with respect and dignity. It all sounded so positive and welcoming and I hoped the reality was equally true.

The whole experience reminded me of an experience I had over seven years ago when I was profiled at the local Wal-Mart store. I wrote about the incident then and received some questioning letters from some Wal-Mart staff, informing me that Wal-Mart did not treat its customers that way.

I made a commitment, because of that experience of being profiled at Wal-Mart, never to shop there again. Happily, now, over seven years later, I have kept that commitment to myself and promise to keep it to the end.

Recently, I read Malcolm Gladwell’s New York Times Best Seller book, “Blink.” The book suggests that we live in a world that assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it. It suggests that the unconscious play a significant part in decision making. The power of a glance and first impressions carry significant clout in our decision making. Gladwell suggests that we should pay more attention to the fleeting moments in our lives and how they can help us make superior judgments.

When we meet someone for the first time, walk into a roomful of people, we make a two second snap judgment about that person or situation. Gladwell mentions how, as part of an experiment, that he grew his hair long. Immediately, in small but significant ways, his life began to change. He started getting speeding tickets all the time. He started being pulled out of airport security lines to be given special attention. The first two seconds encounter creates a powerful hold on the person involved.

The next time someone in authority will ask me to spell “Mississippi,” I might wonder about his or her motives or whether or not he or she is profiling me. I will go with my hunches and spell “Mississippi.”