

Traveling Companion: They talk slowly...

Fr. Michael Tracey

A nurse friend called me the other day. She had spent several years working in Mississippi as a nurse before she transferred with her family to South Dakota.

She had just finished watching the USM-Nebraska football game on TV where USM upset a football powerhouse and dynasty.

She mentioned that, at work, during the week prior to the game, the doctors at the hospital she worked at gave her a hard time because she had worked in Mississippi and a lowly Mississippi football team was about to play their elite team, Nebraska.

She was disgusted when some of the doctors made some very cynical and derogatory remarks about the state of Mississippi and its people. One doctor, in particular, said, "In Mississippi, they talk slowly and produce quickly." The comments, made by the doctors, made her so mad that she felt like punching them for their blatant ignorance and stereotyping.

She said that she could not wait to go back to work on Monday morning and tell the doctors about her pride in Mississippi. She even anticipated crushing the doctors egos by reminding them who beat their great powerhouse team of Nebraska. Obviously, she seized the opportunity to inform the doctors about some of their prejudiced and misconceptions.

The incident reminded me of something that happened to me over thirty years ago when I first came to the United States. I arrived in New York at Kennedy airport and proceeded to go through Customs. After the Customs Officer asked me the usual customary questions, he asked where I was heading. I told him I was headed to Mississippi. He proceeded to tell me how sorry he was about my going there. "After all," he said, "down there, they live in mud shacks and cabins." Obviously, I didn't find any mud shacks or cabins on my arrival.

Sometimes, I meet people from various places in my travels. Invariably, they ask, "Where are you from?" I simply say, "Mississippi." Obviously, they are not satisfied with such an answer, so they question me further, "Yes, but where are you really from?" Sometimes, I confuse them more by saying, "I live in Mississippi." "But people in Mississippi don't talk like that," they fire back, so I ask them, "Well, how do they talk?" My question is met by, "Well, I'm not sure." Many times, the questioner leaves more confused, but hopefully maybe a bit more open or enlightened.

It is sad that, in a time of instant and global communications and ease of travel, one still encounters pockets of prejudice and stereotyping. In an age of sophistication, it is regrettable that we still see people through clouded lenses. At a time when educational opportunities flourish, it is amazing that fools who know too much cannot learn anything.

Many times, we operate out of the philosophy that the best defense is offence; namely that in order to defend out predefined prejudices and rash judgments as well as entrenched opinions, we go on the offense, making the other person lesser than their dignity demands.

So often, in our insecurities, we feel threatened by each other. We are raised in a society that judges worth and accomplishments through comparison. Usually, because of such insecurities, we compare ourselves with others whom we perceive as lesser than ourselves. This allows us to gain a false but comfortable status at the expense of putting someone else down. Accepting diversity is always a challenge. Admitting the uniqueness of each individual without feeling threatened is always a struggle. Prejudice seems to be a great time saver. It helps one to form opinions without bothering to check out the facts.

In the end, I am reminded of something William James said, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."