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American Travels: Who Might We Be Abroad?

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Several years ago, in the semester following 9/11, I asked my Core 104 students to write a response to Elie Wiesel's article "Why Do They Hate Us?" Perplexed by the events of the previous September (as were we all), my students could not imagine that there were people in the rest of the world who did not think that Americans ranked as "the greatest people on Earth." Even now, some time after 9/11, there are still many worldwide who have a deep hatred for America and Americans.

As I have traveled abroad more frequently in recent years, I too have discovered first hand that as an American, I represent some ideals and typecasts that are far from my own personal beliefs. I have also found that my recent travels abroad involve increased critical awareness before, during, and after my excursions. I must be more cautious in my travel choices and, as a single woman in particular, careful in the ways in which I represent myself abroad—not only for my own safety, but to offer other perceptions about the people of our country. The way that the rest of the world perceives us rests on each of us as we travel to other countries as "unofficial" U.S. ambassadors. I have some ideas about how we should present ourselves when we travel abroad and ways in which we might leave positive impressions about Americans.

It would be pretentious to think that everyone in Europe and the rest of the world adored us before September 11th. Of course, that idea is far from true. I do not claim to be the world's expert on travel abroad, but I know from my trips that there are people who have questioned our beliefs and our actions for many years. For instance, when I studied abroad in Russia (for the first time in 1997), I was shocked by the vengeance with which many Russians viewed and discussed Americans. Elderly folks actually spit on some of the younger students as they passed by on the street! I am old enough to recall the "education" my peers and I received in our schooling, "informing us" that the Soviet Union was the enemy and that Russians hated us enough to drop an atomic bomb on us at any moment. We, as students, were prepared diligently to "hate" those who resided in that communist terrain.

I can only imagine that our Russian counterparts were taught the same about us, so comments about how we all carry guns and smoke marijuana without the police caring really should not have shocked me. They, as we, judge us by what they hear from others and particularly from the media. When students and I discuss the impact that the media has on us, I ask them to recall the last several movies they have seen and who the villain in those films are. Of course, now the "bad guys" are most often Middle Eastern (note: people in the rest of the world say "Oriental," not "Middle Eastern") as they were Soviets or Russians during the time of the Cold War. The popular programs, similarly, while I was in Russia, were *Dynasty*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *Baywatch*. We can only imagine how those programs represent us as a culture.

During my second visit to Russia, I faced many confrontations from some Chechan friends of my American friend. They believe that we are a country being run by Jews such as Madeline Albright and that Jewish corruption would be the death of our democracy. I was stunned beyond words. I had never viewed myself as a "Pollyanna," but I also had no idea that others thought such

awful things about my country. These Chechan intellectuals also believe that Americans have a death wish on all Muslims as they say was evidenced by the way the court system and the media treated Mike Tyson. I heard many other negative comments, but of course, that one discussion stands most clearly in my mind. Although I know that not all folks abroad have such negative misconceptions about the U.S., this discussion opened my mind to the possibility that there are harsh detractors of America.

After 9/11, I have encountered widespread negative commentary about the United States, particularly about our politics. In a pub in England, several British women blatantly blamed me for all the problems in Iraq. At a dinner party in South Africa, a woman told me that we are “cocky” for thinking we have it so terribly with terrorists when a daily experience for her was wondering if the bus on which she rode or the shop in which she bought food would be bombed. And in Italy, a group of young men in a café mockingly pointed out to us (I was with another American female friend) that a man in the café looked a lot like Osama Bin Laden. These experiences always take me aback, but they have helped me to formulate the kind of advice I will give to fellow Americans, particularly to students, when they plan to travel abroad.

My first bit of advice involves respect. I have often observed Americans complaining and loudly comparing a country to home. If we choose to travel abroad, we are visitors in another country. We should not have the expectation that things will be like America—even in countries very similar to ours, they are *not* the same. Food will be different, accommodations will be different, and transportation will be different. We cannot use American dollars abroad just as we cannot use Euros in New York. Just expect that to be the case and see the country with a sense of adventure and open-mindedness. Be willing to try different types of foods, visit small cafés and pubs, and travel with an open mind. Try not to do “touristy” activities and visit places where there are mostly tourists, such as guidebook choices for restaurants or cafes; I always try to spend time with locals and experience the culture in the same way as those who live there.

Respect also involves trying to speak the language of the country you’re visiting. I have been many places in the United States where a person will rudely yell out to a non-native speaker, “Speak English!” Then I say, speak French, speak German, or speak whatever language is spoken in that country. No one expects us to be multilingual and perfectly fluent in a foreign language, but there are plenty of small guides now that provide some useful words and phrases in different languages. These guides even tell us how to pronounce words. Recently on a trip to Portugal, I purchased a small phrase book and it was invaluable for helping my students and me to order food, buy necessary items, and request information from hotels and taxi drivers. Getting involved in conversations with people overseas always will give us the chance to demonstrate that we can be a kind, caring people and if we are able to say a few things in another language, it shows that we care enough to bother. Others appreciate our attempts at speaking their language as much as we appreciate when a foreigner tries to speak English.

Further, observing some fashion etiquette is yet another way to show respect in other countries. In Europe, for instance, many people do not wear tennis shoes (“trainers” abroad) in their day-to-day city lives. These shoes are reserved for the gym or for when they play sports. With the internet availability about other cultures, it only takes a few minutes to check into how people of a given country dress. In Paris, for instance, women are famous for wearing high heels while walking about the city; American women in Paris do not have to wear high heels, but wearing some dressier, practical shoes would be more in the cultural style of the city. Americans are also often spotted by their bright, overly flashy choices of clothing. A quick look on the street of most European cities and towns, for instance, will show you that most Europeans choose to wear dark or neutral colored clothing. And finally, in some cities, dressing up is expected. I noticed in Russia that the men and

women were always dressed up, even when going to events such as the cinema, which we consider an informal event. Leaving those baggy, oversized trousers at home is probably a good idea; they just make us look disrespectful to those who do not want to emulate our fashion culture.

Also it is important to be informed. As a recent speaker to the RWU campus said, listen to and watch many different kinds of news. We should not rely on just the evening news or we will assuredly not be informed. I have experienced many opportunities while overseas to talk about the United States and my own personal view on politics. For example, Colin Powell, a well-respected politician according to European sentiment, has resigned. People abroad will most certainly want to talk to us about how we see the political arena in the world changing without the presence of Powell. If we are not able to answer questions or speak intelligently about our own country, we reinforce that we just do not care about anyone but ourselves. Even in such unexpected places as waiting in line to buy some bread, people abroad do want to talk to us and know what we think about certain issues in the world and our own country. We should be prepared to do so, intelligently without belligerence.

Even though these are just a few examples of how I feel that we as Americans can better represent ourselves overseas, I think that they are important. We cannot undo how the rest of the world feels about us, but we can certainly represent ourselves as caring, respectful, and kind people. It is my strong belief that as individuals who have contact with others in the world, we can, one by one, show the rest of the world that we are not worthy of their hate.