

Psychology Column

Protecting our kinder, gentler way

My daughter and I had a great Caribbean cruise over the Xmas holidays with stops in Honduras, Belize, Mexico and the Bahamas. Pleasant, expected experiences are rarely news, but the good people of Florida, USA, gave me something else to write about.

Our cruise left from Miami but I booked a flight to Orlando expecting to spend the better part of a couple of days sightseeing. Unfortunately, a winter storm in Toronto led to missing our connecting flight, and the resultant mad dash got us to the cruise ship with just a half hour to spare. No problem. Our ship disembarked at 8:00 a.m. and our flight did not leave until 8:00 p.m. so that should give some time to take in Miami Beach or the space center.

The cruise line charged us an extra fare for swimming with dolphins in Cozumel, and we lost two hours sorting out their mistake. A quick \$15.00 cab ride took us to the Budget Rent-a-car office. I asked the cabbie what would be a good tip, he replied "Three dollars," so I gave him a \$20 and asked for two dollars change. He walked away mumbling something about being late turning on the meter. I made a mental note to have exact change when taking a U.S. cab.

The car rental place was polluted with people, but they didn't have any cars. They would have more coming but we were number 43 in the queue. The fact that I had booked a specific car a month in advance using my credit card was of no import. Although we were willing to take anything that would carry our luggage, we did not leave until 2:00 p.m., and I realized that the only sites we would be seeing were those that could be viewed from the Florida turnpike.

The turnpike is a lesson on private enterprised roads. You just get going at a comfortable speed and you have to brake for a toll. An attendant takes your dollar, a barrier lifts, and you speed to the next toll. As I entered a lane for the third such toll, the light at the end turned from green to red. The woman at the window asked if I was color blind and slammed her window shut. With a barrier in front, I saw no choice but to back up into the river of on-coming traffic and ease into another lane. Just as I was about to consummate this tricky maneuver, the window opened and a hand waved me forward. She told me to "hurry up" as I paid her one U.S. dollar. She repeated her mantra louder as I did up my seatbelt. So I turned to her, in my best imitation of a polite Canadian, and I wished her and her family a pleasant evening. She looked like she was ready to charge me another dollar.

Thanks to my daughter's very capable navigation, we arrived at the Orlando International Airport a half hour ahead of schedule. We had not seen any gas stations while approaching the airport, so I thought we would find the rental car drop-off and ask directions from there. The attendant was speaking on a cell phone with her back turned. I politely waited until she finished her call. She then turned and asked what I wanted. I replied that I had a car to drop off, but I needed to fill it with gas first. She said "just exit." I asked if she could tell me where I might find a gas station, but she spoke louder, as if I hadn't heard her the first time, "Just exit!"

Have you noticed that it is easier to find a gas station when you are not looking for one? We headed in the direction of the space center, and not seeing any promising signs, turned on side-road, but found that we were headed away from the city. Reversing our course, we crossed our original thoroughfare and found ourselves at another toll.

This toll was not manned by human beings. Instead, a large scoop was accompanied by a sign demanding fifty cents. Another sign said "Do not leave your vehicle." Neither my daughter nor I had any Yankee coins. There was a car behind us and a barrier in front of us. I broke the law. I left my vehicle.

I approached the old Buick with a dollar and asked for some change. The woman driver looked in her purse but did not have any change either. The Blacks inside appeared in animated discussion. Then a hand protruded from the back window and dropped some metal slugs into my hand. I offered to pay for the blank slugs but they refused my dollar. They also gave me directions to the nearest gas station. I threw the pieces of metal into the scoop as I walked back to my rental car. I think these were the nicest Floridians I had met after leaving the cruise ship.

We were an hour late in finally obtaining our boarding passes, but the ever-friendly West Jet staff efficiently got us to the plane on time. I reflected on the day's experiences on the flight home. It is possible that the cabbie had a dozen small children at home and needed to squeeze every dollar out of his customers to feed them. It is possible that the toll attendant felt trapped in a meaningless, low-paying job that could be better done by machines. It is possible that the car rental attendant received some terrible news on the telephone and was under considerable stress when I asked her for directions to a service station. On the other hand, a culture that emphasizes aggressiveness and self-centered individualism will tend to imprint these qualities on the people in that culture, and those qualities will be most pronounced in times of stress. I think this is one of the reasons that US American tourists are generally disliked wherever they go, so that many end up pretending to be Canadian.

We northern North Americans pride ourselves with having a kinder, gentler society. We need to consciously live that talk and resist being overwhelmed by the cultural influences that come from the US corporations and media that so dominate our country.