

When your country is struggling

December 14, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I once heard of a scenario in which an American professor at a foreign university asked his students to compose a list of at least 15 problems their country faced. I was shocked. The homework might as well have been: “Make a long list of things that are wrong with your country.” That story made me uncomfortable. I wondered, “How can a foreigner (especially) ask (local) students to do such a thing?”

As I try to keep abreast with news from the United States these days, I cannot help but reflect on the situation I just described. How would it feel to me, I am asking myself, to have someone ask me for a fat list of points that are “mao bing,” as the Mandarin goes, with my country? Incoming headlines these days tell me indeed that the country of my birth, of my passport, of my citizenship, is a country with problems, with things wrong, or however we may wish to put it.

There is no need to detail recently highlighted difficulties linked with charges of racial profiling and police officers in the United States. At this time, the place names alone of Ferguson, Cleveland or New York are all that is needed to trigger consciousness of The Problem. Ferguson and Company, of course, are the cities in which significant and frightening protests have occurred after perceived law enforcement abuse. What do we Americans say when local friends ask us to explore these situations with them or, worse, explain them?

Now we have new headlines about C.I.A. operatives conducting torture sessions in secret prisons in a handful of countries in the aftermath of the September 11, 2002 attacks. How are Americans abroad (or within the country) to answer queries about George W. Bush approving torture plans in 2002, and then not being briefed about them until 2006? Information of this nature is contained in the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee report now getting publicity everywhere. That report is too weighty to sneeze at. More than 6 million documents back it up. For the record, predictably, critics of the Obama administration, mostly Republicans, are saying those documents and that report are unreliable.

At times such as this, whether the talk is of hostile race relations in some situations in the country or crimes related to American foreign policy or military life within or outside American borders, Americans living abroad feel a sharp sense of vulnerability. We also sense a churning mix within of anger, sorrow, shame, and disappointment.

If asked for comments on such messy news from a country we call our own and dearly love, we may err by rushing to defend or to criticize without sufficient information at hand. We could strike back at our interlocutors, or over-react in ways we may later regret. When we feel under siege ourselves, it is easy to unfairly accuse others of hypocrisy, or to engage in embarrassing generalities or excuse-making.

If friends confront me about my country's shortcomings, I usually remind them that no country can be completely proud of itself. We are all wrong sometimes. I add that freedom of the press is one way to safe-guard the truth. Wrong that might have gone unnoticed in the past has come to light precisely because of the openness of American society and a deep well of decency among ordinary citizens (and voters). This is not possible in countries that lack freedom of expression or true democracy.

I also argue in favor of individual good. Generalizations and stereotypes are like slices of swiss-cheese. They are shot full of holes. Public service as a police officer, a member of the military, or a political office-holder is more than an anonymous combination of the good, the bad and the ugly. Service for the sake of others is also very much the offering of a life. People in uniform and in positions of authority are persons with personalities, values, and hearts of their own, too. They are not robots, all alike and mindless.

This disheartening news from abroad about racism, abuse, and torture need not be the end of the story. Tragic as it is, this news is a collective call to conscience for us all, regardless of our nationality and political ideologies. All of us can and must do far better than this. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column focuses on weaknesses and wrongs in American society and life. An American living in a foreign country is the author. Should foreigners in a foreign land say negative things about their own country, or should they automatically say "nice things"?
2. Have you ever thought of "weaknesses" in Taiwan society and how these weaknesses may appear to be in the eyes of foreigners living in Taiwan? What may be examples of "things not quite so good about Taiwan" that foreigners may be aware of?
3. This column ends with the question of stereotypes and generalizations about countries, people, and so forth. What is an example of a "stereotypical" idea for you? For example, "All Americans -----," or "All Taiwanese feel -----."

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