

## On Borders, Boundaries, and Barriers

Yesterday's landing in California of Space Shuttle Atlantis, following its mission to the International Space Station, was good news for the whole planet. Yet not finding radio coverage, I watched the event live by Internet.

There was Atlantis, gliding quietly down toward the desert like a gigantic bird, then perching silently in the runway, shutting down her propulsion systems, releasing her crew. I felt a wave of relief. Mission accomplished.

We are, all things considered, one global community. On Thursday, I soaked in the Jacuzzi before a long swim in the club where I belong. Traveling had aggravated my chronic back pain. Before long, a Filipino friend jumped in. We began talking about the various nationalities making up our parish populations. When I mentioned India, an older gentleman waded over and introduced himself. He was a Hindu and first generation immigrant. "We are all praying for Sunita Williams and the Shuttle crew members", he said, his hands joined together. "All of us, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, we are all praying for a safe return".

The expedition had already delayed its return due to need for computer repairs at the Space Station. They had already abandoned two attempts to re-enter earth's atmosphere on Thursday. Fuel levels were running low.

Obviously, he was very proud that a person of Indian descent (Sarita's father is from his homeland) would have joined such a prestigious group of astronauts. June 21<sup>st</sup> would mark 195 days in space, beginning with her sojourn on the Station as engineer and conductor of various scientific experiments. But more importantly, he saw the collective, international concern for a safe return as a positive sign. We are all together, in prayer.

I was reminded of a scene from the Astronaut Farmer, which played on the flight from Houston (NASA's tracking headquarters, by the way) to Seattle last Friday. I hadn't planned to watch, but the stewardess threw me the headset and said, "no worries." I hadn't hesitated at the price, but because I thought the movie would be mediocre. It was better than I anticipated.

Having persevered in his dream, the farmer (named Farmer) achieves the ultimate: he puts himself into orbit. From there, he looks down, awestruck, on the earth's continents, circling nine times when his capsule suddenly loses power. Unlike the Atlantis crew, only his family knows he's there.

It's strange, but beautiful, what happens when you have circled the globe a few times. Suddenly, borders and boundaries become less prominent. You may grow in appreciation for the many advantages of being an American, or of living in this most blessed of nations, but being a world citizen begins to take on a greater and greater value. As with the astronauts of Apollo 13, who had one narrow chance to make it back when their systems failed near the moon, what ultimately strikes you is just how small the earth really is.

Last Thursday morning, jogging past Lathrop Annex School, I witnessed a whole bunch of kindergartners preparing for graduation. With Pomp and Circumstance playing, they practiced their procession, two by two. It was heartwarming to see kids, who represent so many cultural backgrounds, united in their pride, their unsteady little feet taking such a giant step in life

The second time around that field, I passed them as they sang, together, a patriotic hymn. Was it "God Bless America?" I wish. Maybe it was just: "It's a Grand Old Flag." Whatever the case, as I heard them shouting in perfect unison, my mind suddenly flew south of the border to an orphanage in Tijuana. There, on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007, our youth had been deeply impressed to hear forty kids reciting in unison, before lunch and afternoon classes, a long passage from the Gospel of Luke: "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever would save his life, will lose it, and whoever would lose his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (9:23-25). We all understood.

Suddenly, everyone was on the same footing. It didn't matter what our point of origin or our particular national affiliation might be. Now, what mattered most was to live, together, as children of the One God. He had put us all on earth to fulfill one purpose. And even though that one purpose has everything to do with Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Savior would remind us, his followers, that we are all called to *love*.

The third time I orbited past the kindergartners, a teacher was instructing them, "Shake with the right, take with the left; shake with the right, take with the left." At first, I thought she was giving a primer course on the methods of American capitalism (or, for that matter, of most economic systems): *establish a relationship, win confidence, and take what you can*.

It seemed such a bitter contradiction of the song they had been singing, and the dignity of their procession. Of course, the teacher was explaining

how to receive their diplomas. But my mind was already back in Tijuana, at the busiest border crossing in the world. There, we had stayed two days in the “Casa de Migrantes”, where 150 or so homeless men reside on a temporary basis. All of those with whom we spoke had been deported from the United States, some after working as many as 20 years. True, several admitted to having caused their own misery through alcoholism, drug use or dealing, or other self-defeating behaviors which undermined their efforts to remain and work in the USA. But others had been the victims of an economic system which invited them to cross illegally for the sake of their under-paid labor, only to expel them after years of hard work.

For these people, the border is not just a line drawn on a paper map or an inconvenient boundary that disappears from the perspective of space. It is a harsh reality of fences, barbed wire, sensors, police patrols and German Shepherds, together with miles of desolate desert, where over 4,000 white crosses mark the misfortune of those who never succeeded in making the journey. This border so porous to us who have proper documentation is as hard as death to thousands who, whether legally or not, want to cross over.

Given that nearly all the 22 participants in our mission trip to Tijuana were children of immigrants, or themselves born in another country, we spent a lot of time and money making sure we’d get them back across the border.

For this reason, we began worrying when news came that, on Wednesday the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, the San Ysidro crossing was shut down by a demonstration of teachers protesting the privatization of their pension plans. The measure, pushed by President Calderon and his party, threatens their future security.

Suddenly, we who had the world at our fingertips, were insecure in our assumption that we’d be able to cross the border without incident. For a day, we had to prepare ourselves mentally to experience some solidarity with those whose lives have shattered against the barrier between our countries. I remembered that one of our kids had a father who, despite his excellent character and record, had nearly been deported a few months ago.

As it was, by the grace of God and by timing our travel at 1:30am on Friday morning, we experienced the fastest passage at San Ysidro that I, in over 50 crossings, had ever experienced. We must have had the help of our angels, and the anointing of the Spirit. Or maybe the guard at the gate was himself an angel. He treated us with great respect, asked a few questions, trusted our responses, and let us through in less than 10 minutes.

The border seemed to dissolve behind us as we headed homeward in the protective cover of night. That evening, we'd all present ourselves in the charismatic prayer group and witness to the good things God had done for us during our mission trip in Mexico. At the same time, we'd never forget that, for most of the world's population, borders remain fixed sentinels between those who have and those who do not, between the lands of the free and the lands of less opportunity, between the privileged and the poor.

May the God of Creation, who fashioned this beautiful planet without borders and boundaries, help us who live together on earth never to forget that, whatever divides us, we are all children of One Father. That's the good news which motivated the Hindu gentleman on Thursday to wade across the waters and declare that people of all religions were praying for Suni. He might as well been worshipping in the great river Ganges. For him, the safe return home of a pilgrim in space was all that really matters.

Inspired by this man's faith, I conclude with a passage from the Scriptures:

“Our citizenship is in heaven. And from there we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...” (St. Paul to the Philippians, Chapter 3, verse 20).

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land...For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (11:8-10). May we, too, find our eternal city.

*June 22, 2007, Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA.*



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