

Americans abroad: Identifying with people in other cultures

From the Editors in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

While visiting Istanbul this summer, an American pastor stopped to look at an outdoor display of photos depicting American soldiers' abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The pastor noticed that a Turkish man viewing this gallery of atrocities was getting visibly agitated. When the man became aware that an American was standing nearby, he made a gesture as though to strike the pastor with the back of his hand.

That's what it's like to be an American abroad these days. Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* said that in every Arab country he's visited over the past two years, people don't want to be associated with the U.S. Even moderates and would-be reformers tell him: "Please don't support us. American support today is the kiss of death."

Zakaria also observed that at the recent Republican convention, the cheapest laugh lines came from deriding foreigners. He noted that Americans see it as their mission to export their version of liberty to other countries but at the same time exhibit very little interest in those countries and in how people in those countries view the world.

Recently the Christian Century staff had a chance to visit with Craig and Cindy Corrie, parents of Rachel Corrie, who was killed in March 2003 while protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes in Gaza by the Israeli occupation forces. Corrie, 23, stood between an Israeli bulldozer and the home of a Gazan family. The bulldozer ran over her.

When we asked about what led Rachel to that act of protest, her parents noted that somehow she had learned to see things from the perspective of the downtrodden. Cindy Corrie said that Rachel always did see things differently. She acknowledged that the family had tried to inculcate an international perspective. They had had exchange students living in their home, and as a teenager Rachel went to Russia for six weeks, which proved to be a transformative experience.

Being Christian is as much about perception as it is about belief or action. It's about seeing people first as creatures of God rather than as defined by race or nation or gender. Christians welcome foreigners into their homes, and appreciate the hospitality shown to them when they are strangers traveling or living abroad.

Rachel Corrie is an unusual example of a person able to identify with the plight of those living in a different culture, under very different circumstances. That capacity is something of a mysterious gift, but it is also a trait that can be nurtured, as it seems to have been nurtured in the Corrie family. It's a capacity that desperately needs to be nurtured at this moment in American culture.