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October Column
The World Isn't A Mirror
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My father called me in a panic a few days ago. My sister, en route to visit me, had gotten bumped from her flight. "Can they even do that?" he asked me." She did eventually arrive with a suitcase that would take gold in the Olympics of terrible packing, should such a thing exist.

It isn't just Americans who struggle with traveling. I recently discovered a Dutch friend doesn't own a passport. When comparing notes with expat friends, I feel decidedly untraveled. When comparing notes with human beings who still live in their country of birth, I'm shocked at how little of the world they've experienced.

Everyone self selects their social group and this gives all of us the perception that the world is more like us than it actually is. This is especially true of expats. When living abroad, you congregate with people who speak your language and those people are much more likely to live a life similar to you than the average person.

Those of us who have to get on an international flight every year to go home for holidays negotiate the airport experience, on average, much more often than those who don't. What to know the flight options from Amsterdam to New York or Mumbai? Ask someone from there. They can tell you faster than Cheaptickets can. Want to know if you can fly with five bottles of wine, a hamster or a Playstation? (All things I've had in my luggage at one point or another.) Skip forums. Ask any expat parent.

I managed to calm my father down and, unless my sister reads this column, she will never know about the frustration I experienced watching her pack. But I'm not usually as patient. As I went through airport security with a friend a few months ago, she had her bag searched and the agent pulled a full tube of toothpaste out of her suitcase. "Are you serious?" I muttered under my breath.

She snapped at me, "I didn't know toothpaste was a liquid. I don't fly very often."

Airport security, a thing that seems as normal to me as walking, is something, is for very many people a stressful and confusing process, one to which they are not accustomed. In some other situation, my friend would be frustrated with me instead.

So, I politely suggested to my sister that she might want to put her glass perfume bottle into a Ziploc bag for her return flight and bought my friend a replacement, travel-sized toothpaste. Maybe, in turn, the universe will repay me with some patience when I'm struggling.