

A Philosophy on Discrimination

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Abstract

In response to the ongoing discussions of anti-Black racism, I thought about what I can do to help further discussions on Black Lives Matter. I've already seen many discussions about policy, and I've seen people discuss their own experiences, but I haven't seen much discussion on how an individual has actually dealt with discrimination. I'm not talking about responding to say microaggressions but psychologically how to understand discrimination in a conceptual framework. That's what my following reflection discusses: an individual mindset on how to deal with discrimination, since I wish I had learned more about that when I was younger. I don't have a particularly unique mindset, but I do think this is an important aspect of discrimination that warrants critical thought. I want to preface my comments by saying that I would not change anything about my own experiences. I was very lucky to have great people around me my entire life and would not be where I am without those people or those experiences.

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To start, I'm from Rolling Hills Estates in southwest Los Angeles County. My father is African-American from the city of Los Angeles while my mother is from South America. If you Google the demographics of Rolling Hills Estates from the Census in 2000 (I was born in 1995), you'll find that it was 74% White, 20.1% Asian, 4.8% Latino, 1.2% Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Needless to say, I'm not sure where the other 1.2% was at. A question I've often received (only from White and Asian people) is how I identify. Over the years I've come to understand what people mean when they ask me this, but in reality, this is a silly question in my view. How I identify doesn't really matter. Growing up, I played a lot of tennis (outside), so I was actually darker than my father. When people looked

at me, they thought I was 100% Black, so that's how I was treated. Regardless of how I identified, I was treated like a Black man, so that was the experience I had. But of course, I'm not seeing myself for the first time...So I was puzzled...Why would someone ask me how I identify if they know how I'm treated, since they know what I look like and how others see me? My mother's family is from South America and my father is Black, so why would I identify as anything other than what I am...since that's what I am? Why did that matter anyways?

But this is how things were growing up. I remember during the party scene in the movie *Get Out*, Chris talks to the different members of Rose's family. I couldn't stop laughing during this scene because of how realistic this scene felt. In the movie people say the following things:

"Hey I play golf...You know I don't have the hips that I used to, but I do know Tiger. Gordon loves Tiger"

"So, is it true...Is it (sex) better?"

"Fair skin has been in favor for the last couple hundred years but now the pendulum has swung back...Black is in fashion²."

I heard countless comments similar to the above on a regular basis. It was as if me being Black made others uncomfortable, so to reduce the discomfort they needed to point it out somehow, but they weren't sure how to. I heard the following comments:

"Hey man I'm so pumped we have a Black president!"

“You’re the best Black tennis player I’ve ever seen!”

“Wow I’m surprised how smart you are!”

“You’re a lot different than what I expected.”

“Affirmative action is so stupid, but you definitely deserve to be here.”

I could go on and on with these comments. Now I know, this doesn’t seem like a big deal, and in an isolated setting it isn’t. But remember, where I grew up there were no Black people. When I went to school there were some, but not many. Many of them lived in other neighborhoods and many of them in high school were not in class with me. I played tennis growing up where I was one of three Black kids in my general age group who consistently played tournaments in Southern California (which from San Diego to Santa Barbara spans four hours driving), and the other two both lived over an hour away from me. Much of my dad’s family passed away or moved away, so I didn’t spend much time with them, though my dad’s family had many mixed couples... I did spend a lot of time with my mom’s family since they were around, and I was again the only Black person there other than my dad.

I’ve heard other Black students who lived in Black areas refer to school as the “sunken place,” but for me that was kind of my entire life experience. I didn’t have anyone who had a similar experience taking everything into consideration, and I didn’t have a place I could go where I felt comfortable or “home” so to speak. I admit, it’s a strange thing to say growing up in such a nice place...But it gets old when you go for a run outside and everyone closes

their garages or stares at you the same way they stared at Chris as he went upstairs to check his phone (K. Michael, 2017). It’s a nice area...But who is it supposed to be nice for?

After a while, I just kind of got used to it. I’d go for runs and people would look at me. I’d look at them and wave. They’d close their garage one day, and I’d run by their house the next day. I remember once a school crossing guard asked me to run on the other side of the street since kids were walking there...Hmm, well I suppose you do need to protect the children! Really, it felt like that scene in *SpongeBob* where even Squidward’s house wanted to know Patrick’s secret (AreaEightyNine, 2018). In general, I always felt like I was being watched. That’s why I found that scene where Chris goes upstairs to check his phone so frightening²...It was all too real.

At the same time, it was hard to know what exactly was real...Was I actually being watched? That’s what makes the area and time period I grew up in somewhat unique. Was it all in my head or were people actually looking at me treating me on average differently than my white counterparts? Now of course there were instances where things were pretty clear...Here are some:

A group of white students were rapping to a song and said the N word on multiple occasions. They turn around and see me standing there. They said, “Well that’s not a big deal, right? You’re cool with it, yeah, it’s just a song?” After saying I wasn’t ok with it, they said, “Why are you so sensitive?”

“What do mixed kids look like? Is it Black skin with white spots?”

“I bet slavery wasn’t that bad.”

“Black people should be in jail more. They’re statistically more likely to commit crimes.”

In reference to playing capture the flag in the Call of Duty video game...Said to my face was the following: “Let’s play cap the nig.”

“I can’t let my parents see me with you.”

After comparing multiple tests: “Wow we wrote the same thing and I got way more points than you.”

“Your dad’s a doctor? Wait, he’s full Black?”

When I would bring up my point of view on any of this with my peers they would devalue or ignore my opinion since of course racism didn’t really exist anymore. Looking back at these comments I can see them for what they are, but when you’re the only person thinking the way, you do in a group of others who don’t think like you it’s easy to question your own thoughts, especially at a young age. I knew everything wasn’t in my head because I could predict many of these comments with regularity and some of it was so blatant like what I posed above. However, it was still difficult to explain to people who for the most part didn’t care. I didn’t have the vocabulary or experience to explain myself and respond in a satisfactory manner. Additionally, when you hear something over and over you start to believe it. And I understood what people kept telling me...That I was pretty smart *for a Black kid*. I worked pretty hard...*for a Black kid*. I got into a good school *because I was Black*. I was good at sports *because I was Black*. No matter what I did the

messaging was clear: *You are inferior to me because you are Black, and you don’t deserve to be on the tennis court with me...You don’t deserve to be in school with me...You don’t deserve to date my daughter/sister...And you don’t deserve to live where I do.*

On top of this messaging, was a bit of an identity crisis that was almost counter to the above messaging. You see I’m half Black, and my dad is a physician. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve heard comments (only from White and Asian people) that revolved around this concept: That I’m not actually Black because:

1. I don’t talk like other Black people
2. I’m not poor enough
3. I’m “only half” and
4. I was not stereotypically “Black enough” which relates to the first two.

Whenever I did something athletic or did well in sports it was because I was Black. Whenever I did well in school it was because I wasn’t really Black. Whenever I was well mannered people were surprised but seemed to understand once they found out I was “only half.” This was confusing to me because I was factually African-American and Latino. It wasn’t something I chose or decided to be. My dad is Black...my grandparents are Black...and my great-grandparents are Black. My mom is Argentine...my grandparents are Argentine...and my great-grandparents are Argentine. It’s not like I have a Latino card or an African-American card I pick up for processing when I feel like being Black or Latino. It’s factually what I am. And yet it seemed like in the eyes of others my identity would kind of come and go as they saw fit in terms of what made sense with the stereotypes in their head. I did find comfort in that I never heard any of this from other

Black people. However, what made all this difficult was that I felt like I was constantly dealing with questions of my identity and race at a young age where I didn't really understand half of what was happening anyways. I figured eventually I'll figure some of this out, but for the time being I took the older generation's attitude of grinding away. The following were stories I heard from my father's family:

Similar stories happened to family members who were in the military and worked in professional fields: "I got pulled over by a police officer. I didn't do anything wrong I was just on my way to work. The first officer walked over to me and pointed what looked like a shotgun to my face. Like he was right next to my face. He said they were going to check my car and that was it. The second officer checked my car. To be honest I thought that was going to be it for me...But after what felt like an eternity later, they left and didn't say anything else to me...It was the 5th time I had been pulled over that week."

"The sign said the apartments were for sale, so I wanted to check some of them out. The owner told me he wasn't going to sell to my kind."

"I was in class and everybody was watching the Olympics. My classmates were openly rooting for the Russian sprinter because they didn't want to see a Black guy win the race...I was sitting with them..."

"One of my classmates called me the N word and that I didn't deserve to be here (I was the second person to attend this place). So, I punched him he had it coming...They kicked me out after that because of course...It was my fault."

There are plenty more, but again I don't want to belabor the point. The general attitude the older generation endorsed was the following: to ignore forms of discrimination (for the most part). As messed up as people and the system can be, there are opportunities, especially in comparison to the past. And not everyone is intolerant. You can end up in the place you want to be and try to change things along the way...Especially when you get to a position of power. Things are much better now than they used to be. You should be thankful you get a shot at all. It may be difficult, but who are you helping by complaining about it and subsequently not trying? You can legitimately be angry every single day at something that happens, but how healthy is that for you? My mom's family had a similar mindset, so that's what I did.

If you talk to anyone who has known me from any time point, they will likely immediately mention my work ethic. I often got up at 5 in the morning to go run before school started in high school. I played tennis tournaments almost every weekend and would study in between matches etc. Friends at school told me I needed to party more...Have fun. R-E-L-A-X Aaron Rodgers style. They thought that I wanted to do what I was doing, but they didn't get it. I didn't really expect them to base on comments and reactions I'd heard in regards to when I did speak on race. I didn't drink in high school because I was scared of what might happen if I was at a party and the cops showed up. I did my best to follow the rules and maximize my abilities in everything I did, but it wasn't just for me or those who came before me. I didn't want to mess things up and decrease the chances of an African-American behind me from getting an opportunity. I imagined my ancestors around me like a Star Wars hologram Jedi

Council meeting supporting me. I knew what they went through was much worse than my experience, so I thanked them and looked to them for support. My classmates, my neighbors, and sports mates may not have understood what was going through my head, but I had my ancestors that did. And of course, I had God. That was enough for me. In fact, it helped me look back at all the people who were constantly looking at me.

But that was just it...No matter what I did I always felt that I was one misstep away from tearing down everything I had worked for. The previous generation told me to put the blinders on, but it was hard to ignore the feeling I was constantly being watched and judged. Even when partaking in life decisions where discrimination may be an issue, my father and I often stayed behind...Just in case. It was hard to simply ignore this because being Black affected so much of what my family and I did and more importantly...What we *didn't* do. My goal was to show people that their messaging of me being inferior...More importantly of my people being inferior was incorrect. I wanted to show them they were wrong so that they would change what they thought. I knew I was the only Black person or one of a few Black people that a lot of my neighbors and classmates actually knew. I felt like that gave me a responsibility and an opportunity to make an imprint on them. When they thought of Black people, they would certainly think of what they saw on TV, but they would also think of me.

At the same time, I embraced what I saw as an opportunity, I also felt a lot of pressure. I was well aware that most African-Americans (including many in my family) did not grow up in such a wealthy community and did not have the opportunity to attend such well-resourced schools and

become connected to so many well-off people. I was also well aware that my parents were happily married while their seven siblings were all divorced. I could go on and on about how I would not choose anyone else over my parents. My point in bringing that up is that I had as clear of a path as I could possibly have to be successful in whatever meaning you can think of. All I had to do was work hard. Many people would do anything to be in the position I was in...I felt like I had no excuses. I had to succeed not just for myself and my parents but for “my people” in general. My ancestors had fought for this exact opportunity, and I couldn't let them down. At the very least, I had to try.

And try I did. However, as I progressed through schooling I at times became more confused. I wanted to help others (both other African-Americans and non-African-Americans), but I wasn't sure how to. I also wanted to help myself and do well but minimize the pressure I felt. I felt like there had to be a healthy way to both be upset and...Not be upset? I remember when I saw Avengers, I was like wait how did the Hulk do that he's always angry (The_Juice_Goose_Plays, 2012)!? He gets it! In all seriousness, one passage in the Bible that has stuck with me is the following: “But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you Matthew 5:44” (Carroll, R., Carroll, R. P., and Prickett, S, 1998). I found that message so beautiful, and that is essentially the type of attitude I tried to have.

I remember driving with my dad to a tennis tournament and since it was Sunday we listened to a sermon on the radio. The preacher said something along the lines of the following:

“And so there I was driving on the freeway. I’m sure many of you have had this same experience of driving on the freeway. And suddenly, someone cut me off. I couldn’t believe we almost got in an accident. What on Earth happened? My sister wanted me to honk and said the driver was a jerk. To be honest, I kind of felt the same way. How many times have you gotten mad when someone cuts you off while driving? And then I thought to myself... One of the worst days of my life was actually when my mom passed away. I was on the freeway at the time trying to make it to the hospital, but I didn’t make it. I immediately pulled over and cried and cried. Now, it’s kind of a blur for me, but I was driving awfully fast to get to the hospital, and I pulled over awfully quickly since I could barely control myself. I’m not saying that’s what I should have done... But what if that driver just found out the worst news of his or her life? I’d hardly call someone a jerk if he or she just found out mom passed and had to quickly pull over. What does that say about me if I’m so quick to judge and accuse someone that I don’t even know?”

When I decided that I wanted to learn how to love my enemies, so to speak... It was clear to me that I had to learn more about myself, as Dr. King talks about in his speech *Loving Enemies* (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, 2017). I had to accept who I was and embrace the situation I was in. I needed to acknowledge my flaws and continue to work on them. It’s actually acknowledging and understanding my own fears and insecurities that has allowed me to be kinder to others... To truly understand what they may be feeling. Nowadays, these experiences of vulnerability and suffering are more prominent in the forms of books, movies and tv shows, which I think can be helpful

in figuring out what’s going on with yourself.

An example of a show I wished I saw earlier is *Dear White People* on Netflix. These resources are important to note because at least for me, it was easy to think that I was the only person who was going through what I was going through when I was growing up. That may have been true, but I could’ve probably made a similar argument for lots of other people at my school who had their own difficulties; I wasn’t homosexual. I wasn’t a woman. I wasn’t a Muslim. I was healthy. My parents weren’t divorced, etc. My point in saying all this is that at least for me, suffering has been an inevitable part of my life. Moreover, it’s been an important part of my life, and I’m guessing that the inevitability and importance of suffering is true for most people. Suffering has forced me to look within myself and actually have a greater level of empathy and understanding for others. Knowing that others suffer similarly has helped me connect with them better and figure out better ways of communicating and ultimately changing them. It’s also made me more open to and actually change myself while also feeling more secure about myself. When King talks about the redemptive power of love that’s what I think he means... Taking the time and effort to see others where they are and offering a chance to help them and be helped by them.

I remember, in high school one of my classmates went on about how I was going to get into whatever college I wanted because I was African-American. I frequently heard these comments in my schooling. In fact, many people told me I was very lucky to be African-American... And oh how great life would be as an African-American female. My senior year in high school I heard this argument

from an angry classmate again and decided to speak up. I looked at my classmate, but instead of seeing her with anger or resentment as I would have in my younger years, I saw her where she was. I said the following: “You know when you go to your college (private school in the Northeast), I want you to look around your first day of class. I’m not going to your school so I don’t know...But I’m going to take a wild guess and say in your first big lecture class you’ll maybe see a few people of color

there. Then you’ll see the other half of the class. Now you may not know it at first, but you’re going to see a lot of kids whose parents paid a lot of money to be there. You’re going to see a lot of kids whose parents went to that school or who knew the right people. Now I’m sure some of them will take advantage of the opportunity...Well, I’ll reserve my opinion for when I see it myself... But you tell me...What or who are you upset at?”

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