Checking my Privilege

Justice is about trusting in others as much as ourselves. Justice is still a rarity even today, because as is in our nature, we are always suspicious of those people who aren’t like ourselves. We need to actively fight against the snap judgements of others we’re prone to make because they can bar us from getting know extraordinary people. Justice is about more than crime and punishment and justice isn’t about equality. Justice is equality, and the fair treatment of others. That, in particular, is hard to find when there’s so much prejudice and stereotyping going on in the world.

Take myself, I tutor in the Plymouth Academic Support Services office at Plymouth State University. For the most part, I’m allowed to mingle openly with the eclectic students that come in for tutoring or mentoring, or to use our office as a place to study and do homework. Most recently, I’ve gotten to know a guy named Oakley. However, it wasn’t of my own volition.

Oakley is hard to miss because he wears long dreadlocks, walks around in a t-shirt during the winter, and carries on his person at any given time about seven knives. He’s also half Caucasian and half Middle Eastern and sports several tattoos along his arms. He likes to cuss freely; he likes to whittle wood in the office, and he likes to talk about his love of fighting. I was very cautious talking to him at first because I thought he seemed very unruly and like someone I wouldn’t want to associate with. You might get the impression Oakley’s a thug by what I’m describing. I thought that too.

I started talking to him only a few months ago, and already all my concerns about him being a thug just feels absolutely ignorant in hindsight. Oakley is a large supporter of women’s rights and talks highly of his sisters, family, friends, and those close to him. He’s an art major and spends most of his time drawing and carving out of wood beautiful pieces that he wants to
hang and display in art galleries someday. Oakley’s not a thug at all; he’s just an eccentric man who enjoys a rugged lifestyle, and I feel very ashamed that I thought anything less of him in the first place.

Oakley’s used to this suspicion and that’s truly unfortunate. He’s not from New Hampshire; he comes here from Virginia, which he’s not afraid to speak poorly of. In his words, “the South is friggin’ terrible. A guy like me can’t do anything without getting pulled over or stopped by the cops.” Just a few days ago at an office party, Oakley and a few of my co-workers were discussing where we were from. Most of us being from New England, Oakley was once again the odd man out. He told us about what his home was like and how maybe most of us would be okay to travel around down there, the exception being my friend Smith because of his homosexuality, and Oakley himself because of his looks and race.

Oakley told us, that even though he can pass for white, being mixed-race is still hard. He’s been told he could pass for Native-American too, but his heritage is more middle-eastern. His background, though, really shouldn’t matter. He’s a very sweet person once you get to know him, but you shouldn’t have to get to know him to treat him well. I’ve never had to worry about being typecast for my skin color or how I wear my hair, but for Oakley that’s a daily occurrence. It’s a daily injustice.

How in the world is it just that Oakley, who only has good intentions and wants other people to get along, is always typecast for how he looks? It’s not, and I made the same mistake. I wouldn’t have stopped making that mistake if we weren’t in the office together almost every day of the week. Appearances shouldn’t be what damns or vindicates an individual. He’s a pretty good person and I’m glad I know him. I learned from the experience of getting to know Oakley that we need to take the same approach to other strangers in the world.
My experience with Oakley had no stakes though, that’s true. If I had never gotten over my hesitance to engage with him because of my concerns about his appearance, the worst that would have happened was I would have missed out on a friendship. However, there are cops and politicians walking around in the world with all the same reservations and prejudice throwing around the power to convict and discriminate on a large scale blindly. That’s not right, and it doesn’t have to be the case. We need to remember that there are people in the world unlike ourselves that aren’t better or worse, simply different, but still equal.

Which rounds us back to what Justice means. Justice is about thinking over the problems of someone else and not just wanting to help but doing something to help. Justice is treating people equally, even if you have some fear or resistance to those people. Justice is about coming together despite our differences and the factors that might divide us. Justice is a lot of things to me, and that’s because it’s more of an ideal that should pervade throughout all facets of life. Inherently though, I’d best describe justice as getting know a stranger, not because you have to, or you’re forced to, but because you’re not afraid to.