

I Live In My Reality, I Did Not Create It

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Contributor

I'd like to write my view of an incident concerning the choice to act or not to act; and how my choice is consistent with how I fit into my society, and how I live my life.

On Friday, November 2, 1990 the incident took place. I was at the PR parking lot of UNC-CH, located about four miles away from campus. I was driving to Atlanta for the weekend, and LaTasha had given me a ride to my car. I had planned to leave at noon, it was now 2 p.m.. Atlanta is a six hour drive from Chapel Hill; I was two hours late, and in a hurry. I had finished a difficult week of being sick, and it was Friday, time to kick back and get the heck away from school. Understandably, my eagerness dominated my thoughts, and intensified my longing to get on the long road to my destination.

As I unloaded my suitcases from LaTasha's car, preparing to put them into my car trunk, a white young lady, about our age, presumably a student, approached us suddenly. She asked us if we had any jumper cables that she could use. LaTasha replied no that she did not, and I gave the same response; then the young lady strolled off in another direction. I proceeded to start my car so that it could warm up as I loaded the trunk. When I opened my trunk to put in my suitcases, LaTasha noticed my jumper cables laying inside the trunk, where they had been for the last six years. LaTasha was shocked. "You told that girl that you didn't have any jumper cables," she said, questioning me. "I'm in a hurry, I don't have time for that this time," I said as I quickly shut the trunk and put the rest of my things on the backseat of the car. LaTasha was visibly bothered, and she said that she couldn't believe that I didn't help that girl. I said that if she had been injured, or if I hadn't been in a hurry, that I would have definitely helped her. I simply wasn't going to go out of my way, and I had no regrets about it at all. I then added that, if it had been "a brother or a sister," an African-American, I might have decided to take the extra time out anyway. LaTasha became quite upset by that pronouncement, and shouted that I was wrong, and that she felt that one should help everybody. She said that to not help that girl because she was white was wrong. I told her that I didn't deny the girl's request because she was white, but because I was in a hurry. I said, I would help a friend out anytime regardless of color, but this was some stranger asking a favor of me, and I declined because I was in a hurry. My decision was a quick one, I didn't put a lot of thought into it. However, I do not feel compelled to go out of my way for a white

person. I'll help them if it's convenient; but I just might have decided to take extra time out and try to help a brother or sister. I said goodbye, drove off, and we agreed to disagree.

When I returned to Chapel Hill on Tuesday November 6, LaTasha told me that she felt that I had been wrong by not helping that young lady. She also said that she had mentioned my behavior to my good friend Nichelle, and that Nichelle felt that it was

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somewhat wrong also. I became upset by this continued discussion, and I wanted to explain what I did.

First of all, it is not my fault that the young lady did not have any jumper cables. I have had jumper cables since soon after I got my car, it was one of the first things that my father told me to get for my car. People may give you a jumpstart, out of courtesy, but it is your responsibility to at least have your own jumper cables. Cables are things that you need to have in your car in case of emergencies; if you don't have them, call a tow truck to come out and jumpstart your car for five or ten dollars, and then maybe you'll get wise and invest in a pair.

Second, my ambivalent, or apathetic response was merely one consistent with my daily pattern of interaction with strangers. I have friends of different races, and I treat them like friends, regardless. But when it comes to dealing with strangers, I act as experience has taught me.

As an African-American male, I know to expect certain responses from certain groups in our society. For example, if I needed a jumpstart and I was in Atlanta or any where in the South, I would first attempt to ask for help from another African-American male or female. I would feel comfortable approaching them, and I feel that in most cases, they would see me as another brother, just needing a small favor, and would probably help me.

Likewise, I would feel similarly spirited to help them because of a strong sense of racial solidarity that I feel, as well as the sad but often true fact, that if another brother or sister doesn't help out, often nobody else will. If I have to approach a white male stranger for car assistance, I would first say hello to see whether or not he seemed to be a friendly person willing to help, if I got a bad feeling after the greeting, I would not even bother to ask for help. If I did ask for

help I would not expect the person to go out of their way to give it to me, and if they helped me, I'd be thankful and brief about it. I would not on the other hand approach a white female stranger on the street or in a parking lot to ask for car assistance, because more than likely she would refuse, since I am an African-American male. By approaching an unknown white female to ask for help, in broad daylight, I could easily be accused of attempted assault, or attempted rape. She might just be scared for her safety, and run away from me. If I was an African-American female, there might be a different response, and a more helpful attitude. This situation exists due to racism, prejudice, and fear of African-Americans by the larger society as a whole.

A fact that all African-Americans know, and most other Americans do not, is that African-Americans travelling through the South must plan their stops along the way, in advance. We cannot just stop at any exit in any small town in the South and expect to find hospitality restrooms, restaurants, and or lodging at any time, especially not at night. Such idealistic behavior or lack of foresight on our part could have consequences ranging from being lied to, being refused service, being accused of a crime, or being issued citations by racist policemen, to possible attacks that occur during the night. When traveling to Atlanta, whether alone or with friends, I always plan two

stops, one in Charlotte, and one in Greenville, South Carolina. These are both cities with several food and fuel exits. If ever an emergency arose I would continue driving until I found another large, commercial exit to look for help, in order to insure my safety.

Being singled out by society to have to take so many special considerations while traveling is not something easy to accept, but it is my reality. When will society ever realize the fact that being an African-American young man makes me neither a potential rapist, nor a criminal, nor even a suspect? Even in light of the animosity that I might feel due to the necessity of these extensive precautions that I am forced to take, I still don't say that I would not help people of other races with their car problems. I have been given jumpstarts by whites before, and have given them starts before also. My point is that I do not feel compelled to go out of my way to help them if it is inconvenient, or I am in a hurry. I am not trying to discriminate against whites, but I am not a policeman, and I am not "triple A," it is not my job to help motorists. On the other hand, the knowledge of the common situation that I share with my fellow brothers and sisters, often makes me willing to go above the normal, and give a special, extra effort to help them out sometimes, even when it may make me late, or it is a bit inconvenient.

These different approaches that I would take, and the responses that I would expect to receive are consistent to my normal pattern of interaction with strangers in this society. Like I stated earlier, these patterns do not include my relations to my friends of different races; nor to people in the college classroom, where we can usually be assumed to be fellow students of good will. You may say that the white young lady at the parking lot was not scared of me when she asked for some jumper cables, so she accepted me as equal. Hell, I am not a traitor or a criminal, she should accept me; I don't consider that a favor or a feat. I am not craving white, or majority acceptance to make me feel a sense worth, or belonging, or to make me a whole person; it is not necessary to my existence. I have friends of other races solely because they are really friends, and we like each other, not because they can accept me. I accept, and love myself, and that is enough for me.

As for the young lady, I was in a hurry, so that is why I declined to take the time—plain and simple. You may think my reasoning is warped, and wrong; we would just have to agree to disagree. I live in my reality, I did not create it. I am merely attempting to explain my position.