

My brief encounter with the fear of prejudice

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A while ago I had an intense friendship with someone who very suddenly decided to shut me out of her life completely. It was the first time I encountered this type of reaction/behavior from a person, and I handled it very poorly, insisting on trying to establish contact and apologize and clear the air. After much silence (and a few messages sending me to hell), I purchased tickets to a public event in which this former friend would appear, and out of the blue I got a message from her informing me that she'd call the police if I insisted on attending.

I knew very well I was on the right side of the law—the police had no reason to apprehend me—but for the first time in my life I feared for what could happen to me outside of the law, while the legal sorting out of things took place.

You see, I live in New York City, but I am Puerto Rican—from Puerto Rico, born and raised, accent and all. My no-longer-friend is German. She was visiting NYC

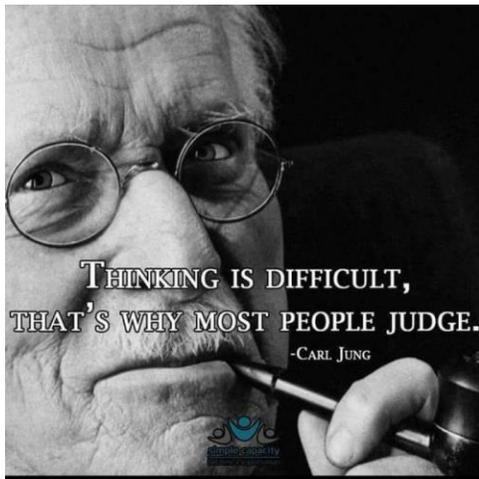
for a few months when all this happened. I have lived a privileged life, as I have [stated before](#), because of my place in society where I grew up, and my education. I have not had to deal with racism based on my “Hispanicness” (“Hispanictude”?), because I grew up in a place where we were all Puerto Ricans; and I have not dealt with color-based discrimination, because I was of the lighter shade among my group. Once stateside, given the fact that I operate within the law and work in what is considered “classical arts,” I have never had reason to fear any encounter with the legal system – I can’t be accused of anything, and I have the knowledge and manners to handle myself if I ever needed to build a case or defense.

However, I do live in the US. And as open-minded as NYC may be, I’m very aware of the police brutality that plagues blacks and Hispanics in this country, the hatred that the Puerto Rican debt crisis has incited among the hordes of ignorami that think that Puerto Ricans are “emigrating” to the States and changing the political landscape, and the rise of Trump with the generalized mass-hysteria that prompts the desire for a wall (and we all know all Hispanics are Mexicans).

But Greta, on the other hand—let’s call her that for the sake of anonymity and to demonstrate I’m not one of those “crazy liberals” overly preoccupied with political correctness—, grew up in (West) Germany, white as someone who should be living with 7 dwarfs, and never having had to deal with the Gestapo.

She came to NYC and made friends with a young kid, an Arab-American who grew up in the Middle East and came back to the US to study, Catholic, conservative, and ignorant in the way that young people are – non-hateful, just inexperienced. So this Middle-Eastern young man (let’s call him Jusef), was the one who advised Greta to just get a restraining order against me if she didn’t want me at the event.

“I too have friends who know the law of this country,” she said to me, failing to see the crass ignorance that the advice exposed, both of the law and of the extra-legal consequences that the move could set into motion.



The thing is, as I learned that day, one cannot understand or quite imagine the fear of oppression and prejudice until one is the object of it. Greta and Jusef are removed enough from this society, or inexperienced enough at life, to believe that the brutality born of discrimination does not happen in the so-called Land of the Free. I suppose that when you grow up in the middle of war, you learn to be wary of governments, regimes and armies, not of subtle mass-oppressions carried out at the margin of a bureaucratic legal system. And I suppose that when you grow up in a country that's still to trying correct the injustices of a holocaustic war that was lost, you learn to believe that the authorities are now fair, because it is their job, and, in your society, jobs are done.

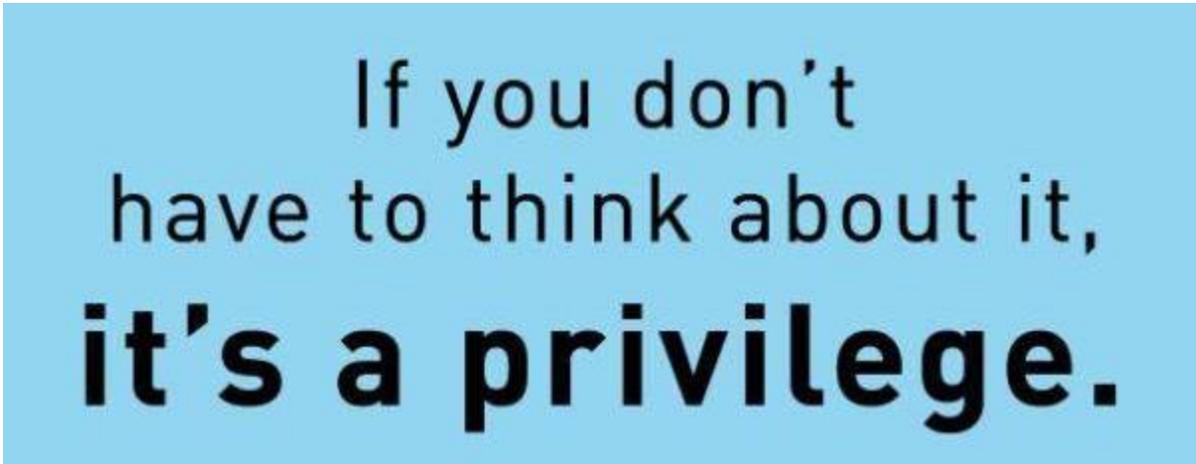
I'm not one to believe or live by labels. If I were to describe myself in simple terms, I am a woman, I'm pretty. And if I were to describe myself so you could tell me apart, I'd say, I have long curly hair, I am Puerto Rican. But outside of these terms, I've never felt defined by my ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

On the day that Greta threatened to call the police, however, I was unable to sleep. I suddenly saw all the labels that I effectively was in this current American society: Hispanic, illegal immigrant, lesbian. (I'm neither illegal nor do I consider myself a lesbian, but that's the thing about prejudice and labels: subtle distinctions are beside the point.) I imagined how my lawyer parents may come to New York to try to raise hell over my detention, and how they could be

mocked, ignored or silenced, as worthless Puerto Ricans. (This damn Caribbean island does nothing but take from us!) I imagined it would be insinuated that this dirty Hispanic lesbian was harassing this good white Catholic girl from Europe. (I am indeed married to a woman, so I must be a predator of all women, of course.) I imagined how, if taken into custody, policemen could try to “set me straight”—show me what I was missing that would turn me into a “proper” or “real” woman. I feared physical aggression. I didn’t fear being raped, but I feared being mocked, thrown around, handled aggressively, not given the benefit of the doubt, not treated according to established protocol, spending the night on a cell floor. I had dreams that I was taken by force and injected with sedatives because I was “resisting.”

It didn’t matter that I knew I had done nothing wrong. Trayvon Martin had done nothing wrong; Sandra Bland had done nothing wrong. They fit a profile, and the system did not serve them. I fit a profile too.

I knew (believed) that all would be cleared up in the end, and I’d be released, apologized to, and very likely the subject of some headline about police mishandling, but a great and potentially painful damage would have already been done. I was terrified of this. And then I was angry. Angry at Greta’s privilege—that she would not even think of these potential consequences.



If you don't
have to think about it,
it's a privilege.

I have understood this fear of injustice at an intellectual level for a long time, and I fought where I could to end institutionalized discrimination. But today, a long time after all this happened, I read Michelle Obama's [commencement speech](#) at Santa Fe, and I realized how much more strongly I felt with her, as she shared her story of generations overcoming the discrimination struggle with another group of sons and daughters of the marginalized and brutalized. Their stories are not the same, but they can understand each other because they have both lived that fear that cannot be taught. It is the same fear that [Jonathan Weisman](#) saw still affects the Jewish community, when he left a publicly open record of what still exists today on his Twitter account. And it is the fear, the same fear, of which I caught a glimpse.

Jusef does not understand that when the Muslim-hating, Arab-fearing Trumpers come, they're not going to care that he's Catholic. He hasn't lived enough to fear discrimination in the US. And Greta cannot imagine the upper hand that her hetero-normal whiteness in this country gives her over a Puerto Rican woman who's married to another woman.

I cannot compare my brief encounter to the struggles of the black community in this country, nor the plight the Native Americans, the Jews and now the Muslims around the world. But I can tell you that the fear I felt, if blown out of proportion, was not entirely unfounded. I have indeed been mocked for my accent in the past. I have indeed had to assert myself in situations where my arguments are shot down even before they're heard, on the basis that I "don't understand" (because of my accent); and I have indeed heard more than one man tell me that they could show me what has not been done right to me before. These are all experiences to which I awarded no second thought. They were inconsequential when I was seen as respectable and educated. The problem is when there's suspicion of wrongdoing, and all assumptions made about your label point to your guilt.

These other communities have seen their people killed, wrongly incarcerated, abused, in reality—not in musings of what could happen—at a much higher rate than I have ever experienced. And because of my brief encounter, I can now begin to imagine what living with this constant fear would be like—it would be life-altering horrible.

And I can stand on the other side and also better recognize my own privilege even more. Greta’s privilege over me is the same privilege that has spared me from experiencing this before. The privilege that kept me from seeing.

We should all look around and analyze the political environment from the point of view of the hated, rather than the hater. Maybe then there would be less of “all lives matter,” less of “build a wall,” less of “Jewish pig,” less of “terrorist towel-head,” yes. But also maybe less abuse of power in individual interpersonal relationships. Fewer unfounded accusations thrown around, more care in the damage that our positions allow us to inflict. Greta did not mean for me to suffer any of these imagined consequences, I’m sure. She never even thought of them. That’s the thing about privilege: it allows you to look the other way and not think, not know, not experience.