

Brian D. Knippers  
Comm. #W-95692

### Standard Racism

In prison, there's a standard for racism. If I were to define it, I'd say everyone's racist. You can laugh, or call me a liar, but in my experience it's true. Massachusetts prisons are as segregated as the Jim Crow south.

I'd recently moved to Massachusetts Correctional Institution Norfolk and I was a fish. For those unfamiliar with the term, a 'fish' refers to a guppy dropped into a shark tank. I was fresh — a new face — and inmates were sizing me up, quizically probing for angles to separate me from my canteen. Norfolk's the least violent medium security prison in Massachusetts, but I quickly learned to guard my thoughts.

I love to play basketball. Growing up as a kid in the burbs we played every sport imaginable. Basketball was my passion though, and I pursued the game all the way to an NAIA College Team. So when I saw a game being played one afternoon at the far courts in the west yard, I went down and called next. I must've played five games that afternoon. I hadn't run like that in three years of confinement. I started walking back to Unit 8-2, when I was pulled aside by an older white guy sitting on the benches in front of the

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soccer field.

"Hey kid, come over here, I gotta' tell you somethin'."

I walked over to where the guy was sitting. He was a skinny, lanky inmate with thinning gray hair. His face looked hard, like he'd done a lot of tough time. The creases on his forehead stood out even when his face was resting. He might've been eighty, but he looked sixty five...jail preserves you. He turned to look at me and his blue eyes were penetrating. It felt as if any bullshit I had to spew would be wasted on this guy. He'd heard it, seen it, and stopped caring years ago.

We went through the introduction process. He asked me what I was in for and I told him to mind his fucking business. I'd learned that much at least.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"Sure, whatever," I responded.

"Why you playin' ball down there with the niggas and spics? Don't you have any self-respect?"

He caught me off guard. He got me. I wasn't prepared for such an intense question let alone the level of racism he's just displayed. I took a deep breath and swallowed.

"There's a white guy game in front of the eights (Unit 8-1 & 8-2) at one o'clock everyday. Play ball with your own kind, it'll go easier on you."

He'd pissed me off. Any initial shock I felt at this racist's comments was gone.

"I'll play basketball wherever the fuck I wanna' play basketball

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with whoever the fuck I wanna' play basketball with old man." He  
start

That was my weak response. It was all I could muster in the moment. Inmates love to shock you by saying outrageous things. It's part of a game we play to see if you're on-point. If you respond the wrong way then you're marked as an outcast. If you act the wrong way you're alienated. But I didn't mind being alienated by this guy and his crew. I don't have a racist bone in my body.

I wasn't raised to be a racist. My mother taught me at a young age that skin color is irrelevant, we're all human beings. When I played basketball in Oklahoma on that NAIA team I mentioned, half the team was black. When I lived in Boston — "The Bean" — I used to play ball in the projects. There were a lot of games where I was the only white guy on the court. As long as I wasn't yelling out racist slurs, or acting like an asshole, the Spanish guys and the black guys never had a problem with me. Now that I'm locked up in in the big house I'm supposed to change the views I've held fast to my entire life and be racist? Get the (expletive) out of here, I'm not doing it!!

I can't fight every pisoner who makes a racist comment. I'd do my entire bid in the hole. After a while you get sick of arguing with the guys around you that slip in the 'N' word, or make an off-color joke. If it's a group discussion I usually walk away. If I'm in a one on one situation and the person I'm speaking to has enough depth to reflect on a subject of this serious nature, I'll quietly explain why I disagree with racism.

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Racism's not a topic easily broached in prison. A lot of prisoners carry deep seeded emotions from events that took place earlier in their lives. The bussing riots that happened back in the seventies in South Boston and Dorchester are still fresh in a lot of people's minds. Massachusetts, Boston in particular, has a long history of racism. Somehow these ideals have carried over into the Massachusetts Department of Corrections and rooted themselves in the vast majority of prisoners behind the wall.

There's no quick fix, or bandaid, that will solve this problem. Change will happen over time by educating inmates and encouraging positive conversation about tough issues. The Massachusetts Department of Corrections role in this should be education through understanding. The result would be a more peaceful environment with less worry about racial tensions. There's always going to be violence, we're locked in a cage. But anything we can do to curb that violence has to be considered, weighed and found worthy.

Someday, I hope racism is something we tell our kids about because they can't conceptualize the notion.