

Defining Personal Boundaries (Without Fried Chicken)

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I don't eat fried chicken very often. Certainly not as much as some people might think I do. It never occurred to me, though, that people believed that about me until a classmate of mine asked me what my favorite fried chicken restaurant was. The two of us, along with five other white people I didn't know all that well, were eating lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. At some point while slurping her absurdly expensive pho, my classmate wanted to know where I went to get fried chicken. When she asked me, I became incredibly confused because, as I said earlier, I don't eat fried chicken very often and definitely not enough to have a favorite restaurant. And just before I was about to tell the girl that in those exact words, it hit me.

I'm black. She's white.

We attended a predominantly white school in a largely white neighborhood. She'd never known more than three or four black people in her entire life. As a result, she'd bought into stereotypes and assumed that I fit into them.

I pondered for a few seconds whether she was actually joking or not, and this was the moment where everyone at the table just laughed it off. But as I watched a couple of people giggle and a couple of others look at me nervously to see my response, her face remained as equally serious as it was when she asked me the question. So, with as much grace as the

awkward fifteen-year-old me could possibly muster, I stuttered how I don't eat fried chicken often or have a favorite restaurant and looked down at my now-cold food.

When I dared to look up, the other five white people looked mightily disappointed in my answer. In particular, the girl who asked me the question was frowning. She turned away from me and opened her mouth to start a new conversation. In an effort to save whatever piece of black identity I wanted them to think I had, I blurted out how I don't eat fried chicken often but I know a great place called Honey Kettle that I ate at once. Everyone at the table turned to look at me during this outburst, and after slightly nodding her head in acknowledgement of my terrific recommendation, the girl turned back around and ignored me for the rest of the meal. And so goes the story of the first time I ever sacrificed a part of my identity to please white people.

This event is one of my earliest memories of a racist experience, but I doubt it was the first. In his lecture, "Step Across This Line," Salman Rushdie states that when the earth's earliest sea organisms were first trying to survive on land and flopping back into the water in defeat or dying, "[t]here were perhaps millions of these unrecorded retreats, these anonymous deaths, before the first successful step across the waterline" (Rushdie 75). According to Rushdie, the first time a sea organism breathed on land certainly couldn't have been the first attempt of an organism to do so. To some extent, I feel that way about getting asked the fried chicken question. That can't be the first racist experience I've had, can it? My classmates and I were all immature at that age, so someone must have said something insensitive to me that I just didn't notice. Rushdie's quote inspired a lingering question, though: how many of those

offhand comments and statements were made before I caught them, and what does that mean about how people perceive me?

I worried about how the girl's comfortability in asking me that question reflected something larger about what she and other classmates thought of me but didn't say out loud. In his lecture, Rushdie states that "[d]aily life in the real world is also an imagined life. The creatures of our imagination crawl out from our heads, cross the frontier between the dream and the reality...and become actual" (99). He points out that the terrorists who orchestrated the September 11, 2001 attacks had to imagine the attacks before they could carry them out (99). If your imagination is the inspiration for your daily actions, what stereotypes did that girl imagine about me in order for her to feel comfortable asking me that question? What did she imagine my reaction would be? How did she imagine my response?

Ultimately, I knew frequenting fried chicken restaurants didn't make me black, but I acted like it did to try to appease white people. That fact made me concerned that I didn't really know what black identity was and whether it was my place to show it to other people. While voicing his concerns about post- 9/11 America, Rushdie speaks to how confused Americans still were about their country's identity a year after the attacks. The people of the U.S. lacked certainty about its country's role in the rest of the world and how, exactly, it was supposed to play that role (90). Before I was asked about the restaurant, my thoughts concerning black identity usually revolved around who my family was, what my family had been through, or what sort of black role models I looked up to. It never dawned on me that a key part of my individual black identity could be how I respond to people's assumptions on what it means to be black. Rushdie helped me realize that at least during that time in my life

when I got asked that question, I didn't know how to respond to those situations, and, as a result, I didn't fully know what my identity was or how it should play a part in my interactions with other people.

In his lecture, Rushdie also discusses the consequences of acting out of fear of the unknown; the way in which he frames his argument reminded me of some of the consequences I have since dealt with. After my incident at the restaurant, I thought about what I could do to protect myself from getting into similar situations. At the time, the best idea seemed to be to distance myself from people like that girl, to ensure that I didn't surround myself with anyone who held stereotypical views of me. What that decision resulted in, though, was me second-guessing everything people said rather than living in the moment and trusting that people will learn to not believe in stereotypes. Rushdie says that if you're constantly shielding yourself, "waiting for the barbarians to arrive," eventually the arrival of the barbarians won't matter because you will have "become the barbarians" you feared (83). While I agree with Rushdie over the basic sentiment that constantly guarding yourself is unhealthy, I think I ended up being more nervous around people than combative or "barbaric." I also think people can manage a balance of guarding themselves and not adopting an attitude falsely grounded in the belief that everyone seeks to stereotype you.

Since that moment in the restaurant I've given a lot of thought to the alternative responses I could've given. I could've just done what I was originally going to do and only stated that I don't eat fried chicken often. Or maybe I could've gotten angry with her and lectured her and the other five white people at the table about their insolence and the problematic nature of the question. But would either of those responses have personally given me any peace? No.

Honestly, I think my responses today to instances like that one vary depending on a range of factors, but if I could pick two consistent thoughts I tend to have in those situations, they are these: questions like that one bother me enough that it feels insufficient to only provide direct answers to them and not address the issues with them being asked in the first place; however, I'm also not inclined enough to give out lessons about stereotypes to people I don't really know. So while that girl certainly didn't act appropriately with me, the most appropriate thing I could've done is given her a response that I knew she would understand and knew she deserved. The fact of the matter is that she honestly didn't know any better, and I should've treated her as such. So I should've kept it simple: "I don't eat fried chicken often, so I wouldn't know a good restaurant to go to." But, I could've said, "I think you're asking me the wrong question for the wrong reasons, and I would really encourage you to research why."

In regard to what she deserved, an angry lecture wasn't it. For one, her question wasn't coming from a place of malice, but one of ignorance. Her intentions behind asking me were just as important as the asking of the question itself. Two, she wasn't someone I cared about enough to want to help personally educate. I should've been willing to challenge her comfort with her prejudiced attitude, but I wouldn't have sat there in that restaurant and pretended like she was someone I felt was deserving of my time, worthy of hearing my opinions on the matter. Last, simply put, it's not like she couldn't educate herself. She wasn't of a socioeconomic background that hindered her access to educational resources. Google Search is still free. While I could've been helpful, I wasn't necessarily needed.

Overall, the lecture's message of understanding identity and its role in the decisions we make is one that many people, like me, will never stop needing. As Rushdie points out, the true display of our character and undeniable reflection of our identity is shown in our responses to conflict. But we don't run from fights. We let the barbarians come. We let them cross the line. And if we feel like it, we wait for them with grilled chicken and straight facts on the other side.

Work Cited

Rushdie, Salman. "Step Across This Line." *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 25 and 26 February 2002, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Lecture.