

The Oppressive and the Unjust; an Essay on Racism

To violate a person's rights – that is the denotation of the word “injustice.” Its connotation, however, holds a different meaning altogether. To be unjust is to be unfair and to treat people differently based on their distorted view of what others *should* be like. In relation to the topic of racism, injustice means that if one's skin doesn't match mine, he or she is automatically less of a person than I am and doesn't deserve the same rights as I do.

Why is there an insatiable need to put people down – to oppress them, in a sense – because they look different? To be oppressive of someone is to be unjust or cruel, usually using a power of authority to demand that someone bends to another's will. This means, by the definition of “injustice” and “oppression,” that to be oppressive is to be unjust. And if oppression essentially means injustice, then they *have* to be the same thing, right? Wrong.

Treating someone differently is the connotation of injustice – to not honor their divine rights as human beings; oppression goes beyond that. Imagine this: two little girls from the same family want ice cream. One is allowed to have as much ice cream as she wants, whenever she wants, but the other can only have it every other day – when the first (and most likely older because that's what older siblings do) girl allows her to have some. This is unjust and unfair to the second girl, but the first doesn't care as long as she gets *her* ice cream, which is why this is an example of injustice. Now, say the first girl physically prevents the second from having any ice cream and forces her to eat something else; like frozen yogurt for the sake of having an

example. The first girl uses the power of being the older sibling to her advantage, compelling the younger to do what she wants her to do. This is oppression because the older is literally *forcing* the younger to obey her.

Think of the two words in this light: injustice is being unfair, while oppression is forcing someone to bend their freedoms according to another's terms.

In January of 1956, Martin Luther King's house was bombed in the dark of the night. Dr. King's wife, Coretta, and his first born child, Yolanda, were in the house when the bomb hit the front porch and damaged it, even taking out a few windows in the process. Luckily, no one was injured during the attack but, because of what occurred, a rally of African American people rushed to Reverend King's home and threatened to go on a manhunt to catch the culprit(s). Always the peaceful negotiator, King begged the unruly crowd to "meet violence with non-violence" by taking their weapons home and not seeking out revenge. The crowd, of course, listened to King's wise words and left his home peacefully. The following year in April, I believe, King alluded to this event in a speech made in front of the audience of a St. Louis Freedom Rally by calling it a "tragic midnight of injustice."

There are plenty of ways to explain why some people act unjustly towards others. For the most part, people treat others unjustly because of difference; culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, or even social status can affect the way people act towards other groups of people. Stopping the unjust treatment of some is astronomically impossible, in my opinion. However, minimizing these acts will be proportionally easier. The answer to minimizing oppression and injustice is

simple: education. If the children of the world were educated on what real racism was and still is, perhaps we could cut down on the unjust and oppressive treatment in schools. Real racism, in my opinion, is unfiltered; like the acts that occurred during the Civil Rights movements. Kids in all grades know that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat during the Montgomery bus boycott (which resulted in her arrest and a fine for disobeying the Jim Crow laws), but do students know the story of James Earl Chaney? Chaney was kidnapped by members of the Ku Klux Klan after investigating a church fire. He watched as the Klansmen shot two of his white friends before he was brutally beaten, tortured, and chain-whipped. James Earl Chaney was then shot and his body left on a riverbank along with the bodies of his two friends. The members of the KKK had nothing against Chaney's friends other than their association with him and yet they were unrightfully murdered and left for 44 days to rot on a riverbank along with Chaney himself.

Children in schools nowadays have no idea of the true horrors that African Americans underwent, especially during the Civil Rights movement. If they were more educated – taught about these horrors more in depth instead of just briefly skimming past the lessons, trying to avoid ‘offending’ or perhaps ‘upsetting’ someone – they could be truly enlightened as to what their own history is, so they won't be condemned to repeat it.

Personally, my life has been a walk in the park compared to what others have suffered through; nevertheless, I too have been treated unjustly. As mentioned earlier, people can be treated unjustly for a number of reasons. The reason that I have been treated differently from others is because of my social status. My family, for the most part, has always had enough money to live comfortably. We've never been the richest family, or the poorest, but we've had

times of struggle and times of surplus all the same. After the divorce of my parents, money got a little tighter, and we started having more struggle than surplus, which resulted in some days where we had little food in the fridge or no water pumping through the tap. This also meant little to no income was spared for buying clothing. In this time, I was growing rapidly, and although I'm the middle in a family of three children, I was the biggest. This meant that I had no hand-me-downs, and I was growing too quickly to buy more clothes. By my fifth grade year, I had about seven outfits that still fit me – only one per day. I was treated unfairly because my family couldn't afford the same clothes that others had. This made me feel as less of a person than my schoolmates, and although nowhere near as severe as being killed and left to rot, I felt like it was the end of my world. Thankfully, my mother reacted by moving us away from my father and back to where we all grew up. I haven't dealt with any more unjust teasing and taunting since that time in my life.

My advice for people who have been oppressed or treated unjustly is the same as that of Reverend Martin Luther King: “never indulge in hate campaigns... [For] somebody must have sense in this world. And to hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe.” In other words, fight negativity with optimism. Every day is a new day; a new chapter in the story of your life, and should be treated as such. Never start your chapter with a closed door.