

When I look in the mirror, I see a black man. I see a large, black, gay man with a baby face much like Michael Brown's. Yet "Big Mike" was shot dead by a police officer and left in the streets for hours, just eight days after graduating from high school in Ferguson, Missouri. By contrast, I have grown up surrounded and protected by the white privilege of my family in the suburbs of progressive Portland, Oregon. I step away from the mirror, and I wonder how others see me and how this shapes me. I step away and wonder how I managed to dodge his fate simply because I was plucked from a similar trajectory when I was adopted.

At times I have taken comfort in the protection and opportunity of my family's white privilege. At parent-teacher conferences, my teachers don't question whether my homelife is hard. When I walk with my white brother, I absorb his privilege. I am not seen as the potential shoplifter in the mall. I have always believed in my resilience, and I am known for taking risks as a leader in my community. Is this because of my nature, or is this because of my privilege? Sometimes, the "what-if's" plague me. What if I had stayed with my single birth mom in rural Texas, the mom who only recently overcame her drug addiction?

When I walk with my black sister, we feel that illusion of white privilege come untethered. Both of us have had the innocence of childhood punctured by the reality that others see us as a potential danger. My first experience of racial profiling came at the ripe age of ten when a cop accused my little sister and me of breaking into our neighbors' home. In reality, we were pet sitting while our neighbors were out of town. Standing there with my little sister behind

me looking at the big silhouette of a man who could take our lives with the pull of a trigger scared me to my core. Still, I know that my own encounters with racism and racial profiling pale in comparison to those experienced by the Michael Browns across America. Had I grown up feeling such constant danger, I might not have had the safety to explore my identity and the courage to come out as a gay man.

People see me as a voice for other black students. Is it because of my outgoing personality, my leadership skills, or is it simply because I'm black and people expect me to be the most woke person in the not-so-diverse room? At times, I deliver. I'm president of the Black Student Union. I was on the PPS board for the National School Walk Out and had the opportunity to speak at the city-wide walkout. Yet, at other times, I feel like an imposter who would not appear so woke, should I be immersed in a black community with the "real" social justice warriors. I feel alone in a community where I search for my reflection. In my mind, this lonely feeling hurts like the bullet that could have come from that officer's gun.

I step back to the mirror. I see my reflection. I see a black man who leads but also needs to be led. I see that my power comes from within, but that I'm also shaped by the reflection others see. I can be black, and I can be free. Even if others want to put me in a box simply because of their label for me, I still have a claim on how I am shaped and how the world is shaped. I can be a leader because of an inner calling and also because of an outer expectation. In the words of Barack Obama, "I never wanted to be somebody who looked like I was avoiding who I saw in the mirror."