

My summer diversity story

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Racism is something people use to break collective action. There is no shortage of historical examples. I will base this essay on a recent incident in Northwest Connecticut, where I have spent much of the summer working on a book. This experience left me, a white person, intimidated and demoralized.

A self-described “big black man” and his son were fishing from a boat launch. I like fishing, so I decided to talk to them. I also inferred that they might be uncomfortable, given that most people here are white and literally no one black. I hoped to make them feel welcome and maybe have someone to fish with for an hour or two.

I encountered these people as I was paddling toward the launch, at the end of my daily kayak session. I have been writing in the mornings, then paddling in the early evenings, in order to reflect on the day’s progress.

This lake can be a lonely place for someone without family. As is probably true of civil society, people here tend not to talk to each other unless they’ve been acquainted for many years. I consider myself an extrovert, which means I need to socialize in order to relax, especially after solitary work. So, it was nice to see new faces.

The first part of our chat concerned whether they could fish where they were. I said yes, since the boat launch is state-owned, but our exchange of facial expressions hinted at the potential for race to become an issue. This is when I decided to stand with them, offer some tips on where to cast, and signal to anyone watching that these people were with a “regular.”

It did not take long for someone grumpy to show up. We will never know his motive, but a description of the scene is suggestive. This man was roughly in his late 50s – white, burly, and wearing a black Dri-FIT shirt. He planted himself about ten feet behind our group, with a 32-ounce Dunkin’ Donuts coffee, and just stared across the lake. He never said anything racist. He didn’t even acknowledge us.

The burly man could have given us more space. He could have stood further back, off to the right, or anywhere else. “This guy is standing right

behind us,” said the dad, “a big black man and his kid.” If the intent had been intimidation, the response proved its success.

Having reminded the duo of their blackness, it was time to chase me off. I said hello to the burly man, in order to start a conversation that included everyone. He grunted at me, half-nodded, and smirked.

My gut response was to want to become less conspicuous. I am easy to recognize on the lake in my fluorescent yellow t-shirt and brimmed hat. Maybe these clothes were ostentatious. Maybe I should leave for a few minutes, change into something “serious,” and see if there would be less tension when I returned.

Or was I running from the situation? It probably was both. I felt I needed to get away, both for my safety and in the hope that a different “look” would de-escalate things. I felt guilty as I walked away, checking back over my shoulder every twenty steps or so.

When I did return ten minutes later, more white people noticed. “Back so soon,” a mother said, followed by another smirk. She was walking with her husband and three children. Again, there was no explicit racism. But it *felt* crystal-clear that those blacks should not be fishing here, and that I was doing wrong by sending the opposite message.

I slinked away to eat dinner alone, worried that someone might find out where I lived. I checked on the fishermen every few minutes, now from about a quarter mile’s distance, and they seemed to be okay. By sundown, they were gone. In the end, I hope they had a nice time, but I can’t rule out that they thought it dangerous to fish from the boat launch after dark.

Looking back at the incident, I am not sure what I could have done differently. Nobody ever did physical harm nor was verbally abusive, so it would have been impossible to invoke law enforcement. And if I am right about what passes for community there, one should not assume that law enforcement is a remedy. People tell me I did the right thing: being friendly, signaling legitimacy, trying to start a shared conversation – and, sadly, retreating when I felt my physical safety was in question.

Racism lets people divide people with otherwise common interests. We are in for a long haul.