

# Boys in the Hoodie

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My take on the racial controversy over the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida. (approx 16-- words)

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## Boys in the Hoodies

**Trayvon Martin, RIP.**

**I have no idea about Trayvon, as far as what kind of kid he was. Death turns everyone into heroes and martyrs and great people. There are few more disingenuous venues than funerals. Never go to a funeral to find out the true character of a man.**

**That being said, I do know this kid was doing nothing wrong at the time he was killed. He was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, wearing the wrong sweatshirt, and maybe most importantly, sporting the wrong skin color.**

**Weâll never know what happened at the crux of his interaction with George Zimmerman, (is that the strangest name for a Mexican youâve ever heard?).**

**My guess is Zimmerman followed the kid based solely on racial profiling, eventually confronted Trayvon, who probably told him to fuck off, as he was doing nothing wrong. Things quickly escalated to physical, and Zimmerman had a gun, Trayvon did not, and another 17 year old black kid has been buried.**

**Zimmerman should go to jail. For how long will, hopefully, be up to a jury. This whole tragic scene, of course, never happens unless he instigates 95% of it, which he apparently did. He is responsible.**

**But there is, for me, a bigger issue at stake here.**

**Profiling.**

**I look at profiling three ways.**

**Itâs unfair.**

**Itâs impossible NOT to do.**

**Its ramifications are avoidable.**

**Trayvon was doing nothing wrong, according to all accounts. BUT, did he take into account he was in a white neighborhood, wearing a hoodie, and that those two aspects alone made him vulnerable?**

**Should we fault him if he wasnât aware of that? Kind of hard to blame him. For a black kid, being part of only 12% of the population in America, wouldnât that mean he would be vulnerable in MOST places he frequented? Like, 88% of the places he goes? There is another side to this coin, however. Should Trayvon shoulder some responsibility here?**

**If indeed a âhoodieâ constitutes, in many peopleâs minds, the attire of a gangbanger, or at the very least, symbolizes potential trouble, shouldnât the onus be on the kid to be more aware of what image he projects by his clothing?**

**I think so. I chose my words carefully. They are nuanced. âMoreâ aware. The onus is not totally on him to disarm other people by dressing like a sheep to blend into the herd, to downplay his individuality by trying not to stand out. But there also needs to be a simple understanding of the message one portrays by the way one looks.**

**Is that right? Is it just? Fair?**

**Hell no.**

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**BUT, I don't remember where any of those three things were promised to anyone.**

**If you are a young black man, and want to wear your hoodie and baggie pants and stroll innocently through a white neighborhood, you either have your head up your ass, or you don't give a shit. Either mindset is a recipe for trouble.**

**So, you make adjustments.**

**This type of stuff is not new.**

**Cigarette packs rolled up in the short sleeves of t-shirts of white teenagers in the 50s signified a hood to almost everyone. It said blatantly, I'm a tough guy. Ducktail haircut, suped up Chevy, disdain for school and conformity? You were a rebel, and destined for mediocrity unless you grew out of it.**

**Long hair and beards in the 60s meant you were a hippie and probably anti-establishment. Worn as a badge of rebellion, these follicle-themed symbols were powerful in their contrarian message. Throw some reefer in there and you were a card-carrying member of the counter culture. A proud one.**

**In the 60s, sporting long hair in the wrong neighborhood could get your ass kicked, and often did. Daring to be different came with risks.**

**Most people who presented themselves in that way knew the consequences. Hell, they wanted the straights and the squares to quake in their boots a little. These visual statements were not only designed to separate them from the masses, but to consciously be different. To establish a sense of individuality was seen as a sign of strength in some circles, even more so as time went on.**

**Today is no different. Tattoos, piercings, baggy pants, hoodies. Displayed in a certain fashion, these cultural accoutrements shout rebellion as much as any of the gestures mentioned above. But there is also a cultural underpinning here that disturbs me. Dressing like a gangbanger is not a sign of reckless individualism. It's a cry for help. A late night howl in the blackness of one's soul for a sense of identity, to *belong* to something. Very few kids from a good home join gangs. Their homeboys BECOME their family. They are well past the stage of caring how other people label them, as**

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long as their â setâ takes them in. These young, disaffected kids seem to know and acknowledge something the rest of us only do under duress, or at gunpoint, so to speak.

There is no â live and let liveâ in the world. We live in a world full of strife and human conflict.

Some as small and ultimately trivial as Zimmermanâ s killing of an unarmed 17 year old black kid. Others as shocking as a uniformed US soldier slaughtering 17 unarmed Afghani citizens, including nine children.

Iâ ve found Geraldo Rivera to be, quite often, a voice of reason on many subjects. He weighed in on this subject by saying he tells his kids to be careful what they wear. He tells them to not wear outfits that may identify them with a group which they donâ t want to be associated with. He acknowledges that, as a parent, itâ s unfortunate and less than ideal to impart the message to his children that they may be judged first and foremost by the way they look. But, he said, heâ ll deal with the loss of idealism if it will keep his kids alive. Itâ s a compromise heâ s willing to make.

Pragmatism should be the rule of the day. Though it may be in vain, making your personal statement through your actions and your character and your behavior leaves a lot less room for misinterpretation. This, of course, needs to be instilled in young people. They need to see, experience, even touch living examples of this. The more brash, outward, lazy, and even sometimes fraudulent message-delivery-system of clothing and body art and jewelry can open a Pandoraâ s Box where hidden prejudices and ignorance reside. You are begging people to prejudge you.

Fanatical Ruby Ridge wanna-be cops like Zimmerman donâ t need much encouragement to fan the flames of their ignorance, hatred and racism. A hoodie might be all it takes to set off a sequence of events that could cost you your life, through little fault of your own.

Profiling is here to stay. In fact, it has been here since the beginning of mankind. The mind makes instantaneous judgments every nano second. Some people claim to not be susceptible to such unsavory thoughts like racism.

Theyâ re lying.

Nobody is racism-free. When I encounter people who claim that, I move on. Watch the eyes of any black person who is subjected to that line from a white person. Disbelief. Or, as I like to say, the look

screams "Negro, Please!"

The word profiling has morphed into racial-profiling. Means the same thing. Categorizing. Labeling. Jumping to a conclusion. Even pre-judging, which begets prejudice. It's unsavory, yet as human an instinct as breathing. Those of us who don't ACT on that instinct keep our society civilized.

That being said, the label of racist should be thrown around like a manhole cover; cautiously and with great care.

I profile. You profile. We all profile. And most ridiculously, we actually expect cops to NOT profile. I wouldn't want to live in a town where cops didn't profile. The elimination of this impulse would take away almost any tactical advantage cops have over bad guys. When cops start giving the benefit of the doubt, they lose their edge.

This is not racism. It is pragmatism. Consider the following:

Why is it OK for every marketing firm in the world to predicate THEIR ENTIRE INDUSTRY on profiling? Sure, they sugar-coat it with linguistically less threatening terms like demographic, but it's the same philosophy. They are gathering data in order to base their decision on something more formidable than a hunch. Like a cop cruising a city for a 10 hour shift. Same thing.

People are fond of the saying, "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, looks like a duck, it must be a duck."

There's another wise proverb about mankind:

"When a man tells you who he is, believe him." ~ Maya Angelou

The world operates under a set of guidelines and precepts that don't always accommodate the iconoclast or the contrarian. There's still room for the staunch individualist to make his mark. In doing so though, one simply cannot ignore the vain superficiality that many people wallow in when making character judgments of others.

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**Judgment of our fellow man, pre or otherwise, should be predicated on the content of their character. Unfortunately, thatâs a great tag line in a speech, but how many of us follow that tenet as THE guideline in assessing our fellow man?**

**I try to. And fail often.**

**When I see a hoodie, I see a hood-rat. When I see baggy jeans, I see a slacker bored to the point of trouble.**

**When I see a young black man dressed like that, I feel fear and apprehension.**

**Fair? No.**

**Reality? Yes.**

**And itâs even more important for the young black man to realize that, than it is for me to be aware of it. Itâs his ass on the line.**

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