Living within the confines of social ideology can at times develop into a routine; however, the unsettling anxiety of feeling out of place because of your religion, race, sex or class is a genuine emotion and familiar burden amongst many minority groups. To understand this, one must leave his or her familiar routine in order to attain a perspective that can only be acquired by leaving one’s comfort zone. Once outside of one’s element, one will be coerced to notice behaviors that one may have not picked up on previously, for instance, the way people talk to you, their posture, eye contact, and the tone of their voice. The largest gestures of dissatisfaction to the most subliminal actions are all behaviors to be observant of while experiencing how others treat you.

The sun was out, and the streets were filled with speed walking pedestrians all rushing to get to their destinations. Today my destination was going to be a place where I usually wouldn’t go: I wanted to venture into a new surrounding and be “the other.” I thought to myself that there was no better place for this than Newbury Street. This place is a mile long street, cluttered with high-end boutiques and fancy restaurants in the heart of Boston. Accompanying me on this adventure was a close friend named Ashley. She is a tall, white, blonde, lean girl, who possesses every characteristic that CosmoGirl plasters all through their magazine. Every visible feature she possesses is contrary to my outer appearance. This set forth a perfect layout for our assignment. As we walked, I assured Ashley that we would be
treated differently based on race. She did not believe that in some stores I may be treated differently and was eager to witness what I was speaking about. We both agreed to walk into our stores of choice as if we did not know each other in order to observe the employees treatment of us.

We continued to walk until we stopped in front of a store called True Religion Jeans. This store is a high-end jean store, where no pair of jeans costs less than 250 dollars. I knew I would never have enough money to waste 250 dollars on a pair of jeans. I walked in before Ashley, and two sales associates were present. They both stood slouched over a shirt rack, positioned as if they had worked one hundred hours in a row. Both employees suddenly glanced my way an offered a forced “hello.” They uttered the greeting of welcome in a robotic tone, which automatically set the tone for the visit. I began to sort through the ridiculously priced jeans and noticed that a man kept peeking at me every ten seconds. Positioned behind the register, this man stood six feet tall and appeared to be about 30 years of age. Despite all the action occurring in the store, I remained an object of interest to him. The prejudiced method of surveillance quickly made me feel uncomfortable and provoked a series of internal questions. Does he think I may steal something? Do I look like a thief? Has he mistaken me for someone else? I could not decipher why I was a prime target. However, I quickly resorted to the fact that it must have been because I am black. This man figured that my skin color implied my intentions and class, thus I was not worthy of proper treatment in his store.

At last Ashley came into the store. Her all-American presence quickly grabbed the employees’ attention, and the once slouched sales associates shot upright and grew excited
upon her entrance. They quickly speedwalked toward the door and proclaimed their desire to help. My blood began to rush through my body, and I felt my hands shaking with frustration and anger. I knew this was bound to happen, yet the blatantly prejudiced actions left me in awe. Not one but two employees, who once rejected me, welcomed Ashley with open arms. Whether their greetings were genuine or not, they still offered Ashley something that I wasn’t deserving of.

I discreetly watched Ashley glance through the clothing and saw how one employee shadowed her like a personal shopper. Everything Ashley touched seemed golden, and the employee insisted “I’ll take that for you.” I laughed inside as I watched the desperate sales associate add up the money in her head, while knowing Ashley only had thirty dollars in her bag. Yet I wondered why Ashley’s skin color and visible characteristics granted her the privilege to shop in freedom. I started to question why the color of my skin denied me the right to exercise my free will in a store.

I tried to divert my thoughts to something more pleasant, but the feeling of being the “other” was slowly getting the best of me. In order to control my emotions I began looking at jeans on the jean wall. As I took a pair down, the FBI-like man who was behind the counter quickly rushed to me and stated, “We don’t have your size.” Immediately my face turned cherry red and my eyes widened with anger as I asked, “How do you know my size, and do you know who I’m shopping for?” His once arrogant face shriveled into a look of embarrassment, and while I had him feeling this way I told him how I didn’t appreciate him monitoring me around the entire store. I demanded that he acknowledge me as an equal customer, asserting that my
skin color did not qualify me for additional surveillance. I then ranted on about all the employees’ actions and how their prejudices reflected modern day society’s biased ideology. He needed to know that his preconceived notions about me manifested themselves as racial profiling which inevitably left me at a disadvantage.

The male employee stood frozen and offered no words or gestures of remorse. He stared at me with a blank expression, leaving me feeling like I was wrong to confront him. Surprisingly, Ashley caught on to the situation and quickly supported me. She told the man that she was disgusted by the employees’ behavior and that she was previously willing to spend thousands there but would not do so after experiencing their unfair treatment. The once blank face slowly displayed an expression of understanding when Ashley projected her frustrations. I believe he understood Ashley more because he figured that she would never call him a “racist,” meaning that sometimes it is easier for people who share the same race, culture or language to confront an issue within their community without becoming defensive. Ashley provided a way for the employee to understand his biased surveillance in a way that I couldn’t have because coming from me I would have been calling him a racist, but coming from Ashley it was a big mistake. This in some cases may allow a person like the employee to question his or her intent and later correct it.

After exiting the store I quickly tried to gain composure. I knew this type of incident was bound to happen, yet I hadn’t completely prepared myself for how obvious it was going to be. Ashley was caught off guard as well, and in an effort to offset our agitated moods, she suggested for the next part of our experiment that we go to a place that was uncomfortable for
the both of us. We wanted to experience being “different” together. We walked several blocks down until spotting Burberry. Burberry is a high-class, British-based store where you can purchase a one-inch leather bracelet for 700 dollars. We knew right away that we both would not fit in there. We strolled across the street and braced ourselves!

Walking into Burberry we felt how a Muslim man wearing a turban would feel walking into an airport. The automatic aura of coldness consumed us midway through the door. An older woman greeted us. She stood upright and firmly rooted next to a clothing rack. Her hair was perfectly aligned and her arms were tightly crossed. Her monotone voice provided a simple “hello,” yet her face exemplified disdain. We walked slowly down the barren store while eyeing the overpriced products. The store was so perfectly organized that both Ashley and I consciously decided to touch nothing! It was like walking down an aisle full of precious glass vases. Although we couldn’t break the clothing like glass, the level of caution we experienced was the same.

We continued to browse through the store like invisible beings. Not one employee offered his or her services, nor did one face put forth a smile. It was as though we didn’t exist. Both of us were dressed casually with no brand name items apparent, which articulated to the employees that we weren’t worth their time. Based on our appearance, and the employees’ assumptions, there was no motivating reason for them to provide a welcoming shopping experience. The cliché that “you can’t judge a book by its cover” is indeed a true statement in regard to this situation because we were judged by observation and not by substance. Not one
employee knew what was inside of our wallet, yet they marginalized us as “outsiders” based on their own prejudices.

Stores like Burberry usually provide an unwelcoming experience to “outsiders” to specifically eliminate certain customers. Employees will create such an unwelcoming atmosphere to subtly kick a customer out. They will disregard their presence and carry on their functions around them so that the customer will leave on his or her own. Prejudiced mindsets were at the center of all our experiences that day. Although all people of different races, religions and cultures shop everywhere, there tends to be a sense of privilege for some customers. When I shop at my usual stores, I don’t walk in feeling like a suspect, I don’t feel like my race warrants special surveillance, and I don’t feel like less of a human. I compiled all of these emotions and started to think that maybe humans separate themselves because it’s less hurtful. Maybe sometimes it’s better to stay in your neighborhood and hang around people who look like you. All of these thoughts ran through my head and I began to answer them as my frustrations subsided.

I convinced myself that it is necessary to put myself in these situations in order to challenge societal ideology. I told myself that if I hide in my sector of security, others will never know how to deal with me or people who look like me. I slowly transformed this horrible experience into a learning mechanism that enabled me to feel liberated in the midst of oppression. I sifted through all the oppressive factors and told myself that although all the employees that day systematically oppressed me, they were oppressed too. The employees were oppressed by false ideology that prohibited them from connecting with great customers
like myself. Instead, characteristics like race, size, and class obstructed our human ability to connect. This very concept of separation is how I believe systems of privilege thrive. Dominant ideology assigns members of society mindsets that coerce them to separate themselves from others who look, sound or walk differently.

From this I could see an entire society veiled by lack of knowledge. I saw that many of us are misinformed about one another, which generates a prejudiced society. I did not want to carry the anger that the employees had against me. I wanted remind myself that this was supposed to be a learning experience, and through that I gained much more than what I set out to understand. Stepping out of the box not only changed me but also my friend who was never exposed to blatant prejudice. I realized that experiences like this are what will eventually bring people together. We all have to get uncomfortable in order to discover the flaws in ourselves, others and society as a whole.