

## Testing the limits of my Principles



### DIARY OF A MALCONTENT

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I feel incredibly betrayed by America right now. No, I'm not talking about the election. I'm talking about drug testing. For no meritorious reason, without any suspicion or misstep on my part, I have to hand over urine to prove to my summer employer that ... actually, I don't know what it's supposed to prove. That's why I'm upset.

I have, by all accounts, been a decent, responsible, upstanding citizen. I have learned — and cared — about our country and the political process. I believe in voting and have done my civic duty since I turned 18. I am generally law-abiding and cooperative.

So I have played the game. I have led a fairly transparent life. I graduated from high school with a state honors diploma. After learning about and working in the real world for eight years, I started college. I have a clear goal and a clear plan for pulling myself up by my bootstraps. Even working two jobs and attending classes full time, I have a 3.95 cumulative GPA. I have been awarded scholarships and grants, and the federal government has seen fit to give me money and tax breaks. All of these institutions have confirmed that I am responsible and intelligent and that I merit that which I receive.

Then last year, I was awarded a Dow Jones Newspaper Fund internship. One of the top achievements for a newspaper student, the internship provided a summer's experience at a top newspaper, a \$1,000 scholarship and a line on my resume that nearly guarantees a good job. But the newspaper to which I was assigned required a drug test. I couldn't understand this. After all, I had applied to the Dow Jones, written an essay and taken a test, competing with hundreds of other applicants across the country. I merited my award. I thought that was what America was about.

From what I have told you so far, can you explain to me what my urine has to do with any of this? Despite everything I have done to show that I am a capable and deserving person, they needed to analyze my body fluids to determine if the chemical make-up of my body was satisfactory.

I drink a lot of caffeine, and I smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. Once in a while, if I abuse these drugs, my consumption makes me shaky and a little uncoordinated — less efficient as a worker. But is this what they wanted to test me on? No. They wanted to find out if, in my off-time, I use illegal drugs. What does that have to do with my merit? Can you find me a marijuana-abuser who makes it to class on time, gets near straight A's and holds down two jobs? Maybe. Can you find me a coke, speed or heroin abuser who can do even one of those things? No. But I fulfill my responsibilities. So what does it matter if I do or do not use (not abuse) an illegal drug in the privacy of my home, on my time?

I thought we lived in a country where people were rewarded if they worked hard and showed initiative and fulfilled their obligations and responsibilities. The conservatives in this country tell me that's true. I almost believed them for a minute. Conservatives also tell me we live in a country where our private choices should be our private choices, without the interference of the government or other people, so long as we don't hurt anybody and we're productive members of society.

But hard work meant nothing and my choices weren't private anymore. I told the Dow Jones I wouldn't submit my urine. Some of my acquaintances questioned my decision on pragmatic terms. The opportuni-

ty is worth it, they said. But there's something bigger at stake that isn't often talked about in relation to mandatory drug testing, even though the practice is widespread and apparently accepted by the masses as a reasonable infringement of our rights.

It's the same thing that's at stake in gender biases and race biases in America. Are you judging me and denying me on the basis of my merit, or are you denying me for some other reason that is unrelated to my worth or capability to do the job?

If the possibility of me using drugs is actually applicable to my worth as an employee, I would imagine that intoxication is the problem. They must be afraid that I will end up intoxicated while working, or that intoxication will prevent me from fulfilling my responsibilities. But then why do they only test for illegal drugs? Where is the breathalyzer test every morning before work, to be sure I'm not drunk? Where is the mid-afternoon caffeine test to be sure I'm not too wired and incapable of working efficiently? If my personal choices are that applicable to a job I've already shown I can do, then why is their drug testing policy not rational and consistent?

Some people will say that I object to a drug test because I am a dirty, depraved drug abuser. But I have nothing to hide. And my private choices aren't the point. The point is, it is anathema to a free, democratic society to violate my body when all of my public behaviors show me as a responsible citizen. No one who believes in freedom could logically support pre-employment drug testing without cause.

I've been told that companies do need to know if I use illegal drugs, because I will be on their insurance, and were I to have a problem in my off-time and require medical attention, their policy would have to pay for it. So where's the responsible driver test before I'm hired? After all, if I get into a car accident because I drive like a maniac, their insurance would have to pay for my medical treatment. Do they check to make sure I have non-slip stickers in my tub before they hire me? After all, if I fall, their insurance will have to pay.

Obviously, mandatory drug testing has nothing to do with my abilities or their insurance. It's a form of bias. They want to be sure I'm not doing something they believe is socially unacceptable. And I have principles, instilled in me by my country, that tell me that's plain wrong. I shouldn't be asked, without reason, to piss in a cup. I shouldn't



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be denied what I'm worthy of because I stand up for my principles. Don't get me wrong — I support drug testing for cause. If I have not fulfilled my responsibilities, or if I've acted improperly and given a reason for my employer to think I may be a risk to their company, then by all means, test to find out. But these people have never even met me, and already they're suspicious and want to be sure I behave exactly as they believe.

Luckily, I was reassigned by the Dow Jones Fund to a newspaper that didn't drug test. That was very nice. But now I again face the dilemma, as the daily Oregon newspaper I'm interning with this summer requires a pre-employment drug test. Guess what? I'm going to give them my urine — not because it's right, and not because I've given up on my principles. But I love Oregon, and I want to live here for a long time. I want to work in this state after I graduate. Social progress is slower

than my college career.

But it's still wrong, and I've still been betrayed. I guess we have a long way to go until people will judge me for what I have shown I can do, instead of for something unrelated. Ronald Reagan once said, "We are committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed ... We want a color-blind society. A society, that in the words of Dr. King, judges people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." And I thought that the philosophy underlying those words was that, in America, we would judge people based on merit. Hey, I can't talk anymore. I have an appointment with a little plastic cup.

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