

# Privilege: A Roadblock to Wholeness

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Talking about privilege is a tricky business anyway, but particularly so when you are an able-bodied, reasonably bright, right-handed, heterosexual, white American whose gender identity is congruent with the outward physical signs of his maleness; who grew up in a home surrounded by books and had two loving, well-educated, professional, middle class, Christian parents, neither of whom ever experienced divorce. I never missed a meal involuntarily. I never experienced or witnessed violence in my warm and secure home. Not going to university was never an option. Annual family vacations were the norm. I was never told I'd have to choose between having a career or a family. And that is by no means a complete list. I am a poster child for privilege. I am reminded of my status every time I stop at a pre-pay petrol pump in Papakura and it comes on without me going inside first.

So why is it so tricky to discuss our privilege? Because there is something in us that resents being called privileged, and almost everyone has some privilege. And yet nobody is totally privileged. We tend to look at those privileges that we didn't have that either kept us down or had to be overcome. Tell someone who does low paid, back breaking work day in and day out to take care of his or her family that he or she is privileged and you will get an earful about how they have had to work for everything they have. "I never had anything handed to me," is the common response. Interestingly, someone who earns a six-figure income annually is likely to say the same thing. So it is tricky because we often have no sense of our identity privilege.

What is "identity privilege?" It is any unearned benefit or advantage one receives in society by nature of their identity. Examples of aspects of identity that can afford privilege are race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, wealth, ability, or citizenship status. It can also include our body type, mental and physical health, height, physical prowess, intelligence and age.

When confronted with our privilege we quite rightly point out that not all privileges are equal. My being right-handed is hardly on a par with those who had the brains, connections and money to go to Harvard or as beneficial as my being white and male. And just because I benefit from one privilege doesn't mean I benefit from all forms of privilege.

So what is the point of discussing privilege? We all have some and don't have others. I didn't choose my gender, sexual orientation, race, family, nationality. I don't feel guilty about it. It's just the way it is. None of us asked for the ones we have. That others don't have ours is just tough luck. The reason we discuss it is because we are Unitarians. We care about the inherent dignity of every person. We care about creating a socially just world. We acknowledge the interconnected web of all existence.

Privilege is at the root of systemic social injustice and oppression. It also cuts to the core of our spirituality: Who we are. While we are not responsible for injustice we inherited, if our privilege keeps us from doing anything about it, we have plenty to feel guilty about. Guilt is not conducive to wholeness. Systemic injustice doesn't just hurt the people who cannot boast one form of identity privilege or another. It hurts everyone. Until we understand that, we're not getting anywhere because the only people of privilege who will ever act to end the system are the ones acting strictly from paternalistic guilt.

Take white privilege, for instance. White privilege is, essentially, a social construction whereby wealthy Europeans wanted to make sure that they could consolidate their wealth by pitting poor people from Europe against poor Africans and Indigenous people.

White folks were made to feel better about themselves and were given paltry privileges over people of colour in order to divide the proletariat. All that meant, though, is that the white folks got to be the lords over people of colour while the wealthy whites still had their boots on

the necks of poor whites! The best example I can think of is how Republicans, the party run by wealthy, white men convinced poor Southern rural white men to vote against their economic self-interest by making race an issue in elections.

These privileges don't help white people nearly as much as they hurt them.

Similarly, male privilege may benefit men tremendously in certain ways. But in others, it puts them into that tiny box of masculinity labelled, "Act Like a Man."

Where privilege goes unrecognised, defended, and/or is protected, wholeness is impossible for individuals or society.

Peggy McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, observes that even when men grant that women are disadvantaged in respect to them, they are still unwilling to grant that they are over-privileged. "They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended."

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, she realised that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there is most likely a phenomenon of white privilege that is similarly denied and protected. As a white person, she realised she had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had not been taught to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which put her at an advantage.

She undertook to identify all the advantages of white privilege from which she benefitted: She came up with 26. Let me list just a few of them:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- Whether I use cheques, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of colour, who constitute the worlds' majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- I can be sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will be facing a person of my race.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.

Her premise is that whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, just as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. She came to see white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that she could count on cashing in each day, but about which she was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank cheques.”

She came to see that her schooling gave her no training in seeing herself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. She says, “I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow them to be more like us.”<sup>1</sup>

So our first task is to remove the blinders to our own privilege and recognise how they disadvantage others. Our second is to understand how privilege is part of the fabric of social injustice and oppression. Our third is to look at ways we can be subversive, actively undermining the dominant factors in the culture that imbalance the scales of justice.

We will look at the first two in a moment, but how can we be subversive?

There are many ways, but once you are aware of your privilege choose not to exercise it. For example, if you are male and come to understand that women are disadvantaged when we talk over them because we are taught our voices are more valuable, choose not to participate in that pattern by being aware of how often you’re speaking and step back to listen more.

Listening more is very subversive. When we truly listen, putting defensiveness aside, to those who are disadvantaged by our privilege we will better understand the root of injustice.

If some people are denied rights or privileges because of formal or state-sponsored oppression, refuse to participate. For example, if you’re a white person who has benefited economically because of privilege, refuse to blame the poor for their plight. Challenge your employer to become a Living Wage Employer. Stand up for a more just system of redistributing wealth. Consider financially supporting those groups and movements that are striving to break the cycle of poverty. Let me make a plug at this point. New Zealand’s fledgling Living Wage Movement of which we are a member organisation needs on-going financial support to continue its efforts to see that every New Zealander receives a wage that allows them to participate in society and still feed and house themselves and their families. It operates on a shoestring budget and has few funding avenues, but an important one is individual donations. Consider being subversive by going to the website to make a donation or fill out and send in a form for doing so on the information table in the foyer.

I would like to conclude this sermon a little differently. I’d like you to get up and push all the chairs to the wall. Then I would like all of you to make a line by standing next to each other along the length of the centre aisle. Face to my right.

Now I’m going to go through an inventory of some privileges we might have or not have and give you some instructions.

- If there were more than 50 books in your house growing up, take one step forward.
- If you ever felt unsafe because of your sexual orientation, take one step back.
- If you believe that you were denied employment because of your race, gender, or ethnicity, take 1 step back.
- If you believe that you were paid less because of your race, gender, or ethnicity, take one step back.
- If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, take one

- step back.
- If you have ever felt uncomfortable about a joke directed at your gender, take one step back.
  - If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, please take one step forward.
  - If you were embarrassed about your clothes or house while growing up, take one step back.
  - If your parents or guardians attended college, take one step forward.
  - If you were raised in an area with crime and drug activity, take one step back.
  - If you have tried to change your speech or mannerisms to gain credibility, take one step back.
  - If you are able to move through the world without fear of sexual assault, take one step forward.
  - If you are reasonably sure that you will not be denied access to jobs or political resources because of your gender, take one step forward.
  - If you are able to be drive carelessly without someone attributing it to your gender or race, take one step forward.
  - If you are relatively sure you can enter a store without being followed, take one step forward.
  - If you are reasonably sure you would be hired based on your ability and qualifications, take one step forward.
  - If your family automatically expected you to attend university, take one step forward.
  - If you have ever travelled outside New Zealand, take one step forward.
  - If your parents worked nights and weekends to support your family, take one step backward.
  - If you have a foreign accent, take one step backward.
  - If you can walk alone at any time of day or night in Auckland without thinking about your safety, take one step forward.
  - If you went to galleries, museums, and plays with your family, take one step forward.
  - If you were raised in a single-parent household, take one step backward.
  - If you have been a victim of sexual harassment, take one step backward.
  - If you have been a victim of violence because of your race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
  - If you ever went on a family vacation, take one step forward.
  - If you have ever had a maid, gardener, or cleaning service, take one step forward.
  - If you are a white male take one step forward.
  - If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house take one step backward.
  - If you have visible or invisible disabilities take one step backward.
  - If your work holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate take one step forward.
  - If you feel good about how your identified culture is portrayed by the media take one step forward.
  - If English is your first language take one step forward.
  - If you have been divorced or impacted by divorce take one step backward.
  - If you came from a supportive family environment take one step forward.
  - If you took out loans for your education take one step backward.
  - If you attended private school take one step forward.

Now look around. What does it tell you about privilege? Are you surprised by where you are? What does it say about us as a community?



i McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," 1990 Winter Issue of *Independent School*.