



Sermon - Hello, Privilege. It's me, John.

John DiLeo © 3 November 2019

A few weeks ago, I found Chelsea Handler's latest documentary, "Hello privilege. It's me Chelsea," on Netflix, and watched it. While it's by no means a cinematic masterpiece, "Hello Privilege" contains a number of truths that are challenging to hear.

In introducing the project, Handler had this to say:

" I was white, and I was pretty, and I had a big mouth. And for some reason, that was rewarded in Hollywood. I just never really questioned anything, because I thought I deserved everything. I'm clearly the beneficiary of white privilege, and I want to know what my personal responsibility is, moving forward in the world that we live in today...where race is concerned. I want to know how to be a better white person to people of color..."

This is something I want to know, too.

As part of the documentary, Handler arranged to visit a student open-mic night hosted by a professor at the University of Southern California. Reactions to her presence were mixed, including one spoken-word response from a black male student:

"What is white privilege? Shit. What isn't white privilege? Every morning I wake up, a conscious reminder of how little I'm valued in society.

...

If you only knew the routine performance I'm forced to put on daily to accommodate your fragility, from changing the way I walk and talk, to making you feel less intimidated, as if my race isn't the real reason you fear me and I'm incriminated."

Another student offered this comment:

"One of the things I've noticed in conversations on white privilege is that it always ends up being about people of color's experience. It comes to here, and it stays here, and it never becomes about whiteness. And I think that's one of the things when you ask what can I or what can the 'we' that is

collectively identifying as white do? You do need to learn about others, but you also have to learn about yourself."

After leaving that event, Handler remarks that "black people are sick and tired of being asked questions about white people's problems. We need to talk to people who are white and - and stop...asking black people to solve our problems, because it's a white person's problem."

Interestingly, this precisely mirrors something Toni Morrison said in a 1993 interview:

"If you can only be tall, because somebody's on their knees, then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is, white people have a very, very serious problem, and *they* should start thinking about what *they* can do about it. Take me out of it."

Tim Wise, author of several books on the topic of race in America, also offers his perspective on whose problem it is:

"[White privilege] is a white person's problem that has consequences for people of color. I mean, it becomes a problem for black and brown folk, because we don't deal with it, right? If we'd deal with it, it wouldn't be a problem. But you can't solve a problem that you won't name or that you won't even recognise is real. "

That recognition is something that took me a long time. Growing up, I never believed I had any sort of privilege. I grew up in a working-class family; my father died when I was young, after which my mother and I relied on Social Security and Food Stamps to keep going. In my hometown, there was just one very rich family - *they* were privileged, not us.

Eventually, I came to realise I've had access to opportunities I never would have, had I been non-white. I've also made a few *really* bad decisions; had I been non-white, any of them could have destroyed my future.

Upon coming to this realization, I had what is a very common reaction...guilt and defensiveness:

- OK, I feel terrible. Now what?
- Am I supposed to tear myself down, in order to atone for the "accident" of my privilege?

In her essay, "Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person," Gina Crosley-Corcoran acknowledges that "it's impossible to deny that being born with white skin in America affords people certain unearned privileges in life that people of another skin color simply are not afforded." She goes on to point out, however, that "this is not said to make white people feel guilty about their privilege. It's not your fault you were born with white skin and experience these privileges. BUT, whether you realise it or not, you DO benefit from it, and it IS your fault if you don't maintain awareness of that fact.

Crosley-Corcoran goes on to expand the conversation:

"I, maybe more than most people, can completely understand why broke white folks get pissed when the word 'Privilege' is thrown around. As a child, I was constantly discriminated against because of my poverty and those wounds still run very deep. But luckily my college education introduced me to a more nuanced concept of Privilege; the term Intersectionality. The concept of Intersectionality recognises that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others. There are many different types of privilege, not just skin color privilege, that impact the way people can move through the world or are discriminated against. These are all things you are born into, not things you earned, that afford you opportunities others may not have. For example: Citizenship, Class, Sexual Orientation, Sex, Ability, Gender... belonging to one or more category of Privilege, especially being a Straight White Middle Class Able-Bodied Male, can be like winning a lottery you didn't even know you were playing. But this is not to imply that any form of privilege is exactly the same as another or that people lacking in one area of privilege understand what it's like to be lacking in other areas. Race discrimination is not equal to Sex Discrimination and so forth."

"And listen, recognizing Privilege doesn't mean suffering guilt or shame for your lot in life. Nobody's saying that Straight White Middle Class Able-Bodied Males don't work hard for what they have. Recognizing Privilege simply means being aware that some people have to work much harder just to experience the things you take for granted (if they ever can experience them at all.)

"There are a million ways I experience Privilege, and some that I certainly don't. But thankfully, Intersectionality allows us to examine these varying dimensions and degrees of discrimination while raising awareness of the results of multiple systems of oppression at work."

To summarise this first key take-away: those of us who experience privilege do not need to be ashamed or guilty, but we do need to acknowledge it, as well as the struggles of those around us without it.

A few years ago, eighth grader Royce Mann created quite a stir. During a spoken-word event at his posh private school, he presented his poem "White Boy Privilege," of which I'll quote only the beginning and the end:

" Dear women, I'm sorry.
Dear black people, I'm sorry.
Dear Asian-Americans, dear Native Americans, dear
immigrants who come here seeking a better life, I'm sorry.
Dear everyone who isn't a middle or upper-class white boy,
I'm sorry.
I have started life in the top of the ladder while you were born
on the first rung.
I say now that I would change places with you in an instant,
but if given the opportunity, would I?
Probably not.
Because to be honest, being privileged is awesome. I'm not
saying that you and me on different rungs of the ladder is how
I want it to stay.
I'm not saying that any part of me has for a moment even
liked it that way.
...
I get that change can be scary, but equality shouldn't be.
Hey white boys: It's time to act like a woman. To be strong
and make a difference. It's time to let go of that fear.

It's time to take that ladder and turn it into a bridge."

After a video of his poem went viral, Mann was interviewed by several news outlets. During his interview on CNN, he commented on what he hoped to bring about: "I'm not asking anybody to give up their lives, to fight for equality. I have other dreams, too. I'm just asking you to try to be an ally. Do your share. When you see something that you think is wrong, that's discrimination, speak up." Toward the end of her documentary, Handler also turns to the question of what concrete things white people can do. Melina Abdullah, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, offered this: "I always say that there can't just be black people advocating for black people, because, to be honest with you, the way this country is moving, they don't really care what black people say. So, we need everybody's voice talking in their own communities."

One of Abdullah's colleagues added: " As a white person, it's not just the one meeting or being in activist spaces...but also when you go to your white job, or when you see your white friends. It's about advocating in all spaces, even times when it makes you uncomfortable."

And that's my second key take-away: In the contexts of the privileges we each have, we need to be constant allies to those who don't share those privileges.

Contrary to the beliefs of many people, this is NOT a zero-sum game. Helping others to gain the same level of privilege we enjoy does not bring us down.

I'm not saying it's easy, though. The right thing seldom is.