Why It Is Important to Teach About Privilege[1]

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They are staring at me, faces blank, but eyes doubtful. They are not buying what I am selling, not seeing the value in what I'm teaching. My responses to the questions were not good enough.

"Why should we care about white privilege? Why should we want to give it up?"

I had expounded on the virtues of being politically correct, the invaluable experience of walking in another person's shoes, the utopian ideal of leveling the playing field—the idea of becoming a "good" person.

My group of generally white, generally middle-class or above, generally women looked back at me, unconvinced. I mean, they got that it would be nice to learn these things, but to see their role in it, just for the sake of making the world a better place. They were unsure.

What I forgot in that moment is that while it is really hard to see privilege, it is even harder to ponder giving it up. The reward of being a "good" person, or the more dreaded "good liberal," in someone else's eyes was not enough of a carrot. So, I settled down and thought about why I was glad I learned about privilege. How the knowledge had changed me, made me see the world differently.

Granted, seeing and realizing my privilege has made me a more well-rounded person (I like to think) and I do feel that my life is richer from knowing and holding dear friends from

multiple identity groups. But there were certain lessons, certain truths, that really made me realize that privilege wasn't all it was cut out to be.

So, without further ado, here are the top three reasons to learn about privilege:

1. Learning about privilege can keep you safe.

When you are unaware of your privilege, you are able to believe the norms to which you were socialized. It is easy to float through life relying on what you have been taught as "true." For example, when the nightly news shows a white male CEO of a company, we don't question that image—it is what we know to be normal. Much in the same way, when that same news program shows us a black male in handcuffs, we know that to be a typical image.

That white, male CEO burned into our brains has serious effects. It subconsciously lets us know that "white" and "male" are good to hire, while others who apply for the same jobs—well, they just have to work a little harder to prove they would be just as good as the white guy. Just so we're clear, some white men make wonderful employees, hard working and honest, but some do not, yet they have a leg up in the interview process that white women and men and women of color don't have. While this privilege-oppression dynamic definitely has serious economic implications, rarely does it have personal safety consequences.

However, the second representation, the one of a black male in handcuffs, is more problematic in terms of safety. From the images we are bombarded with in the media, we are conditioned to see black as violent, hostile, and criminal, white as peaceful, law abiding. Believe these norms and you'll be safe—right?

It is here that this downside of privilege, the one that allows you to rely on norms, fails you in the end. Because while some black males are violent, hostile, and criminal, most are not. And while most white males are not violent, hostile, and criminal, some surely are. And relying on these safety norms based on race, allowing yourself to accept the privileged definitions of violence and safety, encourages us to ignore our natural, built-in defense mechanism we should be using to determine when to run and when to trust.

Gavin De Becker (1998), a leading expert on violent behavior, explains our natural gift of intuition in his book *The Gift of Fear*. Intuition, sometimes referred to as a "gut feeling" or "that little voice inside," is our bodies' way of keeping us safe. However, as De Becker explains, humans constantly override their intuitive signals with conscious judgment. Even though we get the notice from inside "run" or "not safe" or "beware," we consistently overlay those messages with the norms we have learned. And those norms are rife with privileged images and messages from our daily lives.

Case in point: I'm a runner. Every day, I strap on the running shoes, grab a friend, and hit the roads. Needless to say, we run past many people every day. One morning, while running, we saw a figure in the distance, walking toward us. He seemed … weird. Hard to put a finger on what was odd, but something was alerting both of us about him. We looked at each other: "Do you think he's ok?" we asked, which should have been message enough for us to know that he was not. But, he was white, small, well-dressed. We pushed down our intuitive signals, told each other that we were sure he was fine. As we grew closer, the inner alarm bells sounded again: "Should we run in the grass? The street? Is it ok to pass him so closely on the sidewalk?" I think I made the decision, "I'm sure he's fine. We're being silly." As we passed him on the narrow sidewalk, he quickly swung his arm out from his torso, fist ready, only missing punching my

friend in her face because she dove off the sidewalk. As we sprinted away from him, he shouted at us: “Ha, ha, ha, always wanted to see what it felt like to punch a runner!”

Our subconscious intuition warned our conscious mind: “This one is bad. Don’t go near him. He will hurt you.” Our conscious minds said: “Silly intuition, we don’t want to believe you. He is white and well dressed. He’s a small man. Stop being so … girly, wimpy.” My friend sidestepped injury due to her quick reflexes, but we could have avoided the entire incident if we had just followed our intuitive messages. Others have not been so lucky.

I have known people who have ignored their inner voices, their intuitions, in favor of following the messages with which they were socialized. This is a safe friend because a safe friend looks like him. This is a good partner because a good partner looks like her. What has followed has been divorce and loss of investments, and, more violently, psychological abuse, physical assault, and rape.

So, when that voice comes up saying: “This one is no good,” relying on your normalized views of life—white is good, black is bad—instead of your inner knowledge can get you into trouble. Here is another perfect example:

In his essay “Just Walk on By,” Dr. Brent Staples (1986) writes about life in his shoes as he walks the urban streets around his home. A gentle and large black man, Staples describes how, time and time again, women grab their purses and sprint across the street at the sight of him; how he finds himself followed in his office, mistaken for an intruder, and staring face to muzzle with an enormous guard dog in a jewelry store. He shares how, every day, he goes the extra mile to assure the white folks around him that he is no danger to them, he means no harm, he’s just a man going about his life.

One of the gracious adjustments Dr. Staples makes, however, provides a chilling insight into just how far privilege removes white people from their intuitions:

> And on late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (Staples, 1986).

While I appreciate the extent to which Dr. Staples has gone to make people understand, yet again, that he is no threat, the imbedded message of reliance on privileged norms in his statement is rife with meaning. Is that all it takes for white folks to be duped into ignoring their intuitions about anyone they may meet? Hearing a whistled classical symphony? "Ah, well, I have a bad feeling about that man on the street, but since he is whistling Bach, he *must* be safe." I can see the headlines: "Vivaldi Strangler Takes Sixth Victim."

Learning about privilege, about how those norms don't tell the complete, or often correct, story, can free you to reconnect to your intuition. When judgment overlays try to suppress our intuitive signals, we can stop, push those norms away, and tune in to our innate knowledge of how to react to the situation.

And I want to be very clear here: I am not saying that you should swing the pendulum so far in the other direction—all white people are criminals, all black people are safe—that you ignore your intuition out of guilt. As I said in the beginning of this section, some people will hurt

you, most will not, but the color of their skin is no determinant in that equation, despite the normalization of the violent black male. You must reconnect and listen to your intuition in all situations, not rely on those norms of who is bad and who is good. Learning about privilege gives you options. Now you know better.

2. Learning about privilege gives you the whole story.

I really dislike magic. I always have. I groan when someone asks me to "pick a card, any card." I get the willies when the lovely assistant gets locked into the "saw you in half" box and, for the life of me, I cannot understand why anyone would pour a gallon of milk into a hat. But, what irks me the most about magic tricks is the "big reveal"—that moment when the magician pulls your card from the deck or opens the box to offer one whole lovely assistant (not merely two messy halves) or dons a dry hat. I dislike the "big reveal" because I am supposed to be amazed and awed at being duped. Although logic dictates that the magician probably wasn't going to commit a hacksaw murder in front of a live audience, we all still feel relief when we see the assistant jump to her feet and take a bow. We wonder, "How did that trick work?" We watch the show, trying to discover the catch to each trick and we are astounded that we missed it. We are amazed at our inability to see what is in front of us and we applaud the magician for deceiving us. Magic is set up for you to be proud of being fooled.

I don't like to be fooled.

Privilege is like magic—the very invisibility of privilege is exactly why it is so ingrained. Just as you must know that a gallon of milk can't fit into a hat, you must also know that an entire group of people, millions and millions of people, do not all share the same negative or positive traits.

Being comfortable with being fooled means being comfortable knowing only one-half of every story. When the statistic is published that approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population is black, but 45 percent of state prison inmates serving drug sentences are black (Fears, 2009), it is easy to wonder, "Gee, why are all those black folks using drugs? Must be weak/lazy/violent folks. Wonder how they got so bad. "

This is despite the many white friends of yours who smoke pot every day. Or eat shrooms before a jam band show. Or take a hit of acid with the college buddies. That's not drug use, that's just having fun. Blacks do the "real" drugs and get punished for it.

We are not frequently encouraged to ask for more details, like the percentages of arrests versus convictions by race or the racial biases of judges and juries. Privilege allows you to be comfortable with the one-half of the facts you are being fed and incentivizes you not to look too closely for how the trick worked. As if we have bought tickets to the show, we get to nod and wonder at the stereotype, applaud, and move on, content to keep the wool over our eyes. Like magic, the system continues to work, and work in our favor.

But what does one-half of any story buy you? As the racial makeup of the United States shifts, workplaces, schools, and communities are becoming more racially mixed than ever before. For many white folks, that means having coworkers and bosses, classmates, and neighbors who are people of color. In these situations, relying on the white privilege smoke-and-mirrors version of any story makes you look incompetent and foolish.

One thing I know about being privileged is that privileged folks don't like to be surprised about something that was right in front of them all the time. When you're privileged, you pride

yourself on seeing the world correctly, knowing how things work and get done. You like to be in charge.

One of the best descriptions of our personal failings at not seeing privilege comes from Karen Pittleman's treatise on class privilege, *Classified* (2006). In a chapter entitled "The Side Effects," Pittleman exposes how relying on the partial facts privilege allows you to take as truth makes you look foolish and arrogant to those who know the full story. The list of side effects includes:

- The Ivory Tower Effect: assuming a privileged education means that we know more than others.

- The Waffle Effect: getting so overwhelmed by options that we are unreliable or unable to commit to just one thing, ignoring the effect to others.

- The Big Idea Effect: surmising that we're the biggest brains to ever have tackled a particular issue, skipping the step of talking to others working on the issue or affected by its determination.

Reviewing this list, I'm guilty of, well, all of these, as are many of people who hold privilege. The sad thing is that magic in a business meeting doesn't work as well as magic at a magic show. Knowing only one-half of any story when those around you know how the trick worked can leave you with egg on your face, wondering what happened.

So, to avoid the certain duping that will happen when you are called out on your privilege and the resultant feelings of foolishness, take preemptive action. Take the time to find out what

you don't know. Train yourself to see the invisible. Ask the questions you are encouraged not to ask. Discover how the tricks work.

Life is not a magic show.

3. Learning about privilege lets you connect to your feelings.

Wait, why is this in the top three? Who wants to connect to feelings? My students frequently shy away from the "How did this make you feel?" questions. Seems like, for many folks, it would be more fun to knit a scarf, watch a movie, or have a root canal than go through a risky emotional experience.

However, no matter how hard some of us try to avoid feeling our feelings, they crop up at the most inopportune times. Learning how to dive in and grow will make all the difference in your life.

That first "ah ha" moment when you suddenly see your privilege can be earth shattering. It may cause you to reevaluate everything you have been told and force you to reexamine some of your core truths. It will make you look in the mirror and not recognize your reflection as you see yourself as someone you may not like.

I am an oppressor? I am silently benefiting and I didn't even know?

Discovering privilege and your role in it can shake you and make you feel as if you have suffered a great loss, a loss of self. While many of us wouldn't trade our "ah ha" moments for an easy day, we know that the road to redefining oneself can make for a rough ride.

Although much has been written on what it means to realize your privilege, what resonates with me is the original work on stages of grief and loss developed by Dr. Elisabeth

Kubler-Ross (1969). In her groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Dr. Kubler-Ross identified five states that a terminally ill person and his/her loved ones pass through to achieve healing. Kubler-Ross's five stages are:

- Denial—This can't really be happening.
- Anger—Why is this happening to *me*?
- Bargaining—I promise, if I can just make it to Katie's graduation, to Mark's visit, then I'll give in.
- Depression—I just don't care anymore, do whatever.
- Acceptance—I'm ready for whatever comes.

These stages of grief have been widely recognized around the world. Although some people may not go through all of the stages, or progress through them in an orderly fashion, I'm sure we have all felt some of these emotions or thought these thoughts when we have confronted loss.

Unfortunately, some feel that we are justified in going through these stages only when we are dealing with death or illness. However, when we experience a loss of self—whole or partial—due to discovery of privilege, we go through stages of grief. While these stages are similar to Kubler-Ross's, they vary a bit:

- Denial—No way. The world can't be that bad. Can it?
- Anger—Why didn't anyone tell me?
- Bargaining—But I'm a good person. I give to charity. My family wasn't even in the United States when that happened. I am oppressed in other ways. This can't really apply to me. Can it?

• Guilt—Oh, my gosh, this does apply to me. Why didn't I see it? I am usually so smart. I am a horrible person.

• Action—OK, so time to get my feet on the ground and start learning about privilege. I'm scared, but I am dedicated.

When we learn about privilege, we generally travel pretty quickly through the first three stages. But then we generally drop into the deep well of guilt and there we stay. We stay so long that there are even words to describe our wallowing: "white guilt" or "male guilt."

Guilt is a rough place to land, not only because it feels bad, but because it acts as a stopper. We cannot move forward, yet we can't go back. We know that, without some major retooling of values, we are going to make the same mistakes over again. So, instead of taking action, we sit, holding our teddy bears and, perhaps privately, wishing we had never taken "the pill."

I felt this way (although I had not seen *The Matrix*) when I was first called out on my privilege, my class privilege to be exact. I had just begun a graduate program in social work, eager to meet my new classmates. As we sat in a circle during a self-awareness workshop, I took my turn introducing myself to the group of strangers. Following the facilitator's directions, I spoke of what brought me to the school. As I prattled away about my life's choices, I hear from across the circle: "You are totally offending me!" I sat in disbelief. What? What just happened?

"I mean it, you are totally offending me! The way you talk about your family's financial security as if it means nothing to you. The fact that you can say you sometimes don't like the 'burden' of having inherited money. That you don't 'identify with it.' Whatever."

Wait a minute. That person just insulted me—twice. Take a deep breath. OK, what was that statement Grandpa used to say? Oh yeah, here it is: "Just because I have money doesn't mean my life is easy. Really. Money just makes you more comfortable while you deal with your problems."

"You have got to be kidding me," she sputtered, "I cannot believe you are saying this." Then she reloaded for the final blow: "How dare you sit here and demand that the rest of us see you as an individual."

What? An individual? What? I mean, isn't that what we all are—individuals? What else should I expect to be seen as?

The speaker, my offendee, was done with me and the dialogue moved on, giving me time to have a very quiet, very personal freak out. What had just happened? How had I been so misunderstood? And where the hell does she get off judging me like that? "You are totally offending me!"

I repeated the conversation to my friends over the next two weeks. "She's ridiculous," they said, "This is her problem—it's not you. Don't worry, you are totally fine." They were annoyed that she didn't give me a chance. They said that I was one of the nicest people in the world and assured me that, once she knew me, she would see how wrong she had been.

But I just couldn't shake the idea that there was something more to the conversation than my niceness and her attitude. And, believe me, every day of that first year of recognizing my privilege was rough. I denied the way the world worked, denied that I played the role of the unknowing oppressor. I was mad at my former teachers, my parents, myself. I felt guilty and had

many days where I dreamed of learning to knit or becoming fluent in a foreign language. Anything, anything to avoid the mirror and the truth and my feelings of guilt.

Yet, once I faced my guilt—really, my fear and anxiety—something amazing happened. For the first time, the world really made sense. I questioned all of those stories and norms that had felt wrong for so long. I felt my skin all of the time instead of ignoring my whiteness. I owned up to who I was and what that meant I received. I felt honest when I looked in the mirror.

I tell my students, once they delve into understanding their feelings around privilege, they will feel a loss of self. It may be tough. Life won't be easy. But, the rewards are great. Once they learn to see their privilege and to take action, they are so often more comfortable in their lives. They are able to see ways that their privilege is not a deterrent, but rather a means to make change. They understand more about the world, not because they sit next to a person of color in class, but because they have confronted something they had hidden deep inside of themselves. They will see their truth.

In my classes, when I share these top three reasons to learn about privilege with my students, their eyes light up. These reasons don't give them some esoteric rationale about growing a better society. Instead, these reasons directly affect their everyday lives, and the students are convinced to begin moving forward.

So, I'll ask you as I ask them: "Is it worth going through the emotions of learning about privilege and seeing your role in it if it makes your life safer, makes you look intelligent, makes you a better, stronger you?" A pretty good carrot, I think.

Notes

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