

WHITE PRIVILEGE
by David Blakemore
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I want to share my personal experience with white privilege.

I grew to adulthood almost entirely segregated from contact with people of color. Although my family moved fairly often for my dad's job, our neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, Alexandria, Dearborn, MI and Rochester, NY were entirely white. My Lutheran parochial schools in Pittsburgh and Alexandria were entirely white. My high schools in Dearborn and Rochester were entirely white. And then I went to Valparaiso University, where I was aware of only four students of color on campus: one white female, and three males from Gary and East Chicago, IN who were on the basketball team. I recall only one professor of color, a man from India. And finally, the Lutheran churches I attended in Pittsburgh, Alexandria, Dearborn, Rochester and eventually Christ Church in Washington, were entirely white. Although my father had Black employees in the stores he managed, they were always blue collar (usually janitors). My parents had no Black friends. As a result of this strict segregation, I had no opportunity on the one hand to behave in a racist way (except by sharing racist jokes and so-called 'wisdom' about Blacks and Black culture) , or on the other to learn through first hand interactions with Blacks that the racist generalizations about Blacks that I was being taught were just that.

So what was I taught, directly or indirectly about Black people? As a young child I remember watching the victory parade of Pittsburgh native Joe Louis when he became heavyweight champion. Joe was riding on the back of a Cadillac convertible. This gave my white adults the chance to "teach" me about Black priorities: Blacks often drove cars they could not afford, while living in shacks. I didn't know then about Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball's National League in 1947. But my granddad had taught me to be a rabid Cleveland Indians fan. So can 1947, when Cleveland's Larry Doby became the first Black to play in the American League, this gave my grandfather the chance to share with me his racist belief that players like Doby did not care enough about baseball, or about winning. When Doby's superior play turned my grandfather into a grudging fan (Cleveland won the World Series in 1948), his generalizations about Blacks were shifted to Luke Easter, another Cleveland player of color who also contributed importantly to the team's success. And so it went. I picked up as if by osmosis racist generalizations about low Black intelligence, their failure to value education, their unwillingness to work hard, their fondness for street drugs and crime, etc. Notice that any contrary information I might have gathered naturally through direct interaction with Blacks was blocked by my segregation from them. My unquestioning acceptance then of many of these generalizations is a source shame for me today.

What was I taught about America and its society? First, our society is a meritocracy, where if you work hard you can aspire to and achieve anything you want. This is a fundamental belief throughout the dominant American culture, and it came naturally to my parents, who had come to adulthood just as the Great Depression was beginning. No one in either of their families had gone to college, and so one of my parents' primary life goals was that their three sons would go to college. Fortunately, the means were available to accomplish this, hard work by the parents in their jobs and hard work by the kids in school. I certainly was not taught that

America is a meritocracy only for Whites, where one can expect that hard work and native ability will be rewarded. I was taught indirectly at home to expect that economic progress was steady and predictable. The manifestation of this was that my generation would be better off than my parents' generation (and it was, especially for Whites.)

What was I taught in school about race? Of course we studied the Civil War. And the reason most often put forwarded to explain the Civil War was the need to free African-American slaves. (The more obvious reason for the war was touched on only tangentially: to show states trying to secede from the union that secession was not going to be allowed, because of slavery or anything else.) Strangely, though, after asserting that the purpose of the war was to free the slaves, the history books seemed to conclude that when the war was over the struggle for freedom was over. The story of the long (and continuing) struggle to make it possible for African-Americans fully to take part in American freedom was not touched on. I recall learning nothing about Reconstruction, Jim Crow or the Ku Klux Klan, and I was a student really interested in history. (The absence of discussion of the attempted genocide of Native Americans is another tragedy, outside the scope of this presentation.)

Like all American school children in the decade of the 1950s (and often subsequently) I was taught the myth of American exceptionalism. Elements of this included rugged individualism, meritocracy, Manifest Destiny (the genocidal implications of this for Native Americans were not mentioned), the central role of capitalism in an ever improving world, and the responsibility of Americans to help the inhabitants of other parts of the world who are not exceptional like we are, and who sometimes don't even speak English! This took forms ranging from missionary work to the Peace Corps. It seems to me now that a central, unacknowledged aspect of the myth of American exceptionalism is that it applied only to White Americans. The myth of White American exceptionalism contributes to the widespread belief among the White population that American culture and White American culture are essentially the same thing. This in turn leads to the automatic assumption that the right way to do things is the White way to do things. Here is a personal example. I am a long time fan of professional football, which during the course of my lifetime has gradually allowed more and more Black players who have immeasurably improved the quality of the game. As this process progressed (the league is now about 70% Black) the idea of celebrating touchdowns on the field with exuberance began to emerge. Soon players were dancing in the end zone after they scored, devising more and more elaborate celebrations. I can remember thinking the first time I saw this: "they are ruining our game". After all, everyone knew that the right way to react to a touchdown is to calmly hand the ball to an official and leave the field. This was the way it was done when the league was all White, and these end zone celebrations, perhaps a cultural manifestation of the increasing preponderance of Black players in the league, were jarring to many white fans.

As I emerged into adulthood in the early 1960s, inevitably my intellectual awareness of the many aspects of American society in which Blacks are treated inequitably expanded. This perhaps began with the Supreme Court's 1954 decision that "separate but equal" was no longer an acceptable principle governing Black access to education. During the long struggle to make this court decision a classroom reality in the nation my awareness of the issue of inequity was broadened to include segregation more generally. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were landmark laws that drew attention to many more

inequities and in a sense accepted the idea that government has a responsibility to address inequity.

And yet this broadened intellectual awareness of inequity did not dent the comfortable protections afforded me by centuries of white privilege in America. Robin Diangelo, author of the book *White Fragility*, explains this:

“While I can be aware of the unfair use of race against people of color, so long as I have not behaved like a racist personally I have no responsibility for the problem. This gives me a level of racial relaxation and emotional and intellectual space not available to people of color as they move through their day.” (p. 55.).

As I apply this idea to my own life I would phrase it differently. For me the denial of responsibility for the racial inequities in America gives me the **freedom** to be indifferent to those inequities and the problems they have caused. So while I know that there are terrible racial inequities in the way the police work, in the criminal justice system, in education, in housing, in employment and in wealth, White privilege has until very recently given me the freedom to act as if these problems have nothing to do with me.

Here is the essential fact that I have been ignoring or denying all my life: **NOTHING HAPPENS IN AMERICA UNLESS THE WHITE PEOPLE WHO CONTROL EVERY ASPECT OF AMERICAN SOCIETY WANT IT TO HAPPEN.** Did I think that Jackie Robinson played Major League Baseball because he was the first Black player good enough to do that? In fact the separate Negro League was full of superstars like Josh Gibson who were better than Robinson. Jackie Robinson played Major League baseball because he was available when the league owners decided it was time to improve their game by tapping into abundant Black talent. In addition, Robinson had the equanimity of temperament to put up with the inevitable racial taunts that went along with his pioneering presence.

Here is a corollary fact that I have been ignoring or denying all of my life: **THOSE DECISIONS MADE BY THE WHITES WHO ARE IN CONTROL WHICH HAVE, INTENTIONALLY OR NOT, PRESERVED RACIAL INEQUITIES HAVE BEEN MADE ON MY BEHALF!**

I have reaped, and continue to reap, other benefits of white privilege beyond the freedom to deny responsibility for racial inequities. African-Americans cannot count on these benefits. Here is a partial list.

-I can take my self-worth for granted

-I expect to be visible everywhere I go, and I am. When I go into a store or a government office, someone will soon come up and offer to help me.

-In any number of ordinary situations I can count on being given the benefit of the doubt. Examples range from being stopped for a traffic violation to wandering aimlessly through a department store.

-I can be confident that my race will never keep me from doing something I want to do.

-I can be confident that my race will never keep me from going somewhere I want to go.

-I know that I belong in America

-And as a White man, without even thinking about them I feel entitled to all of these benefits.

It is my prayer that some day soon these benefits of white privilege can be enjoyed by all, regardless of race.

Because of the murder of George Floyd, and the leisure time created by the pandemic that allowed me to read broadly over the past year on the issues of race in America, I have gotten in touch with my shame around pretending for so long that racial inequity in America has nothing to do with me.

This presentation is a first, tentative answer to the question: now that I accept my responsibility, what can I do?

-I strongly believe that something all Whites can do is to begin to talk openly about race with each other, as I have tried to do here. At the same time, we can call each other out on casual, everyday racism which shows up in the form of jokes, conventional wisdom about other races, and willingness to ignore injustice when it happens.

-We can encourage dialogue in institutions like our churches, and more broadly in society, on previously taboo subjects like reparations, mass incarceration of Black men and police murders in the name of preserving law and order.

I would like to close with a quotation shared with me by Maureen Jais-Mick, who served as organist-choir master here at Christ Church for 13 years in the 1970's and 80's: "When privilege is all you have ever known, equity feels like discrimination".

Thank you.