

Race: Privilege and Prejudice
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Reading

Doors of advantage swing open so silently and invisibly to whites, says Dr. Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (Here is a selection from the more than 50 ways white privilege works silently in our lives.)

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
5. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
6. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

Reading

Tom DeWolf, author of *Inheriting the Trade*, was first introduced to Peggy McIntosh's theories on privilege when he arrived in Bristol, RI to begin tracing the outline of the lives and deeds of his slave-trading ancestors. Tom, had been a local elected official in Oregon, and was 47 years old at the time he first read about 'white privilege.' Tom lists several of the ways of white privilege, and continues his reflections:

"I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group." That's interesting. No white person is ever asked to speak for all white people. But as I reflect about it, I can remember thinking that if a black person said something, I figured all black people probably felt pretty much the same way.

... I've never been followed around in a store because the owner thinks I might steal something or even contemplated the fact that most of the people I see on television or in newspapers look like me... I fidget while I read because I begin to see how my white skin has given me privilege that I've had the luxury of taking for granted.

Reflections --- Racism: Of Privilege and Prejudice

In 2001, ten people, some distant relations, others brothers and sons from the same family group, set out on a journey of discovery. They meant to discover their own reactions to being the descendants of James DeWolfe, who died in 1837 after amassing a fortune in the slave trade and related businesses.

The ten people had been invited by Katrina Brown, their common relative, to make a documentary about their visits to Bristol, RI where James DeWolfe and his immediate family plied their trade. They traveled together to Ghana, where captured Africans were loaded on DeWolfe's ships. Then, they went to Cuba where enslaved people worked plantations owned by the DeWolfe family. Katrina introduced them to historians and academics who helped them to understand the past in each country. She brought them into conversations about class and race and privilege that some family members had earlier embraced, and others had managed to escape for forty or fifty or sixty years of living.

James DeWolfe's money has followed some of the DeWolfe descendants, who also married into other wealthy families over the generations. Those particular descendants enjoyed many of the class privileges that we associate with wealth – servants, private schools, Ivy League educations, world travel, invested funds and inheritances. As well-heeled and well-educated as they were, they still had a lot to learn about 'race' and 'white privilege' and 'male privilege' and how it affects all of our lives today.

Alan Johnson, the author of *Privilege, Power and Difference*, reminds us that the concept of race is only a few hundred years old. He suggests that Europeans landing in America 17th and 18th centuries could only get the rich natural resources of this land by “taking them away from the Native American tribes who inhabited most of the land... (They) managed to get what they wanted through a combination of conquest, genocide and a complex array of treaties that were routinely ignored. To justify such direct forms of imperialism and oppression whites developed the idea of whiteness to define a privileged social category elevated above everyone who wasn't included in it. This made it possible to reconcile conquest, treachery, slavery, and genocide with the nation's newly professed ideals of democracy, freedom and human dignity. If whiteness defined what it meant to be human, then it was seen as less of an offense against the Constitution (not to mention God) to dominate and oppress those who happened to fall outside that definition.”¹

It is easy to follow Johnson's argument and see that the idea of whiteness played a similar role in the history of slavery in this country. Landowners and farmers need cheap labor to work their land and increase their profits. With the careful interposition of the concept of 'whiteness,' the institution of slavery prospered in a land dedicated to freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

Once whiteness had been created to serve the needs of conquest and capitalism, then white privilege became a part of social interactions. The readings this morning introduced us to the silent world of white privilege, that is -- the benefits that accrue to whites without fanfare -- those differences that make living in a racist society easier for whites and more difficult for

blacks. You don't have to be the descendant of slave traders or slave owners to receive white privilege. You don't have to be a racist to benefit from white privilege, you can even be working to become an anti-racist; and still white privilege will accrue in your favor. You don't have to want the privilege that is accorded to you, or even be aware that it is being granted. White privilege and male privilege are given to the recipients by others, who may be equally unaware of their behaviors granting that privilege. When Tom DeWolf reflected that he had thought one black person's statement reflected shared attitudes with all blacks, he was only then becoming aware that he had been granting whites the privilege of listening to them as individuals, and he was not extending that privilege equally to all people.

But, the reason so many well-educated adults don't know about white privilege is because it is something we aren't supposed to talk about. What happens when we do talk about it? People get defensive, they deny it has anything to do with them, and, if they let any of the concepts of white privilege sink in...they might even drop into feeling guilty for their part in accepting the privilege in the first place.

Now, for a moment let's turn to one of the sermons by Jeremiah Wright that you've heard a lot about these last few weeks. Reverend Wright said:

“Who cares about what a poor black man has to face every day in a country controlled by rich white people? (Somebody missed that. Somebody got nervous because we got some white members here.) I'm still in Bible country. I am still in the text. Jesus was a poor, black man in a country and a culture controlled by rich white people. The Romans....

It just came to me within the past few weeks, y'all, why so many people are hatin' on Barack Obama. He doesn't fit the model. He ain't white, he ain't rich, and he ain't privileged. Hillary fits the mold. Europeans fit the mold....

Hillary never had a cab whiz past her and not pick her up because her skin was the wrong color. Hillary never had to worry about being pulled over in her car as a black man in the wrong (neighborhood).

I am sick of Negroes who just don't get it.

Barack knows what it means to be a black man living in a country that is controlled by rich, white people.

Hillary can't know that. Hillary ain't never been called a nigger. Hillary never had her people defined as non-persons. Hillary ain't had to work twice as hard just to get accepted by the rich white folk who run everything...or to get a passing grade when you know you are smarter than that C-student sitting in the White House.

O' I am so glad I got a God who knows what it is to be a poor black man in a country and culture that is run by rich, white men. He taught me, Jesus did, how to love my enemies. Jesus taught me how to love the hell out of my enemies, and not be reduced to their level of bigotry and small-mindedness.

Hillary never had her own people saying she wasn't white enough. Jesus had his people siding with the enemy. That's why I love Jesus, y'all, he never let their hatred dampen his hope.”²

Did you hear it? Did you hear that black preacher outline the rudiments of white privilege? Let's remove it from the context of the Democratic primary...Let's insert the names of white people in this congregation.

Annette never had a cab whiz past and not pick her up because her skin was the wrong color. Tom never had to worry about being pulled over in his car as a black man in the wrong (neighborhood).

Dexter ain't never been called a nigger.

Linda never had her people defined as non-persons.

Steve never had his own people saying he wasn't white enough.

Yes, Rev. Jeremiah Wright put that concept of white privilege out there for everybody to see. He made it blatant. He showed how it is at work in the Presidential campaign, in classrooms, the workplace, and on street corners. What happened when a black man, a black preacher, brought white privilege and Christian theology together? Four words. All hell broke loose. It's been called a hate speech. Barack Obama has had scramble to answer critics on the right and the left. And the answer Obama gave, while it was eloquent and hopeful, boiled down at one point to saying that Jeremiah Wright was wrong because he didn't understand that things have changed. He suggested that Jeremiah Wright offered a 'profoundly distorted view of this country – a view that sees white racism as endemic and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America...' That, in my humble opinion, is hornswaggle, or if you prefer a more literary illusion – sound and fury. White privilege and the racism it supports are still endemic in this country, and I believe it will continue to shape this country until we who live with the benefits of white privilege learn about it, accept its presence in our lives, and make concerted efforts to recognize that our whiteness is a construct and the privileges of whiteness hurt everyone, of every color.

You might think that I've left the DeWolfe descendants behind, but, I have not. There are several crucial points in their story that make one wonder, "Is this the effect of white privilege?" The first, was the decision to travel to Ghana at the time of Panafest³ Panafest is a homecoming festival for Africans. People of African descent come from all over the world to have their own experience of touching the soil of their ancestors, of making an acquaintance with their homeland. I can't help but ask, "Is it the effect of white privilege that this group of ten would think to undertake their journey as the descendants of slave traders and enslavers, at just this time? Is it the effect of white privilege that they think they should be welcomed anywhere at anytime?" I do know that choice seemed to me to be ill-timed and presumptive.

On one of their last days in Africa the group travels to the "place in the river where, we are told, "captured African women, children and men were given their final bath before being taken to the dungeons....A man performs what appears to be some kind of cleansing ritual for people just upstream from us. He holds large leaves in his hand and dips them in the water. He then brushes them down each person's body from head to foot...Dain (a member of the DeWolfe party) watches the ritual as person after person is brushed with the leaves until there is no one left. I watch him approach the man at the edge of the river and speak with him for a few moments. Dain soon turns and walks away. He joins Elly and I on the steps and says he asked the man to perform the ritual on us. (The man) declined. He said we needed to deal with our own issues and then have our own white elders perform a cleansing ceremony for us."⁴

Dain, I imagine, was moved by the need to find healing, connection, and perhaps even absolution from all the emotions stirred up by the trip to Africa, the sight of slave dungeons, and of being sometimes pointedly unwelcome in the middle of an African festival. Yet, I have to ask again, is this the effect of white privilege that a white male should think to ask to have an African ritual performed for him? And the answer that comes to me is 'Yes.' Even when we find ourselves motivated by the most compelling thoughts, by the simplest of needs to find relief from pain, to become connected to others, with all the best intentions --- our social interactions introduce a level of complexity which makes our simple needs worthy of careful reflection.

Here's what I've tried to convey about white privilege this morning. It is insidious and endemic. We don't readily recognize its effects, we can easily be encouraged to deny it exists, and that, of course helps to shore up white privilege in every way. Most Americans don't want to hear about white privilege, and they certainly don't want to hear about it from an emphatic, and angry, black preacher. And, even when we are aware of white privilege we may still be oblivious when we are acting as the privileged whites we experience ourselves to be.

Here's why we talk about white privilege in church. The answer to all of this, of course, begins with you and me. We need to accept the presence of white privilege in our lives, and in our interactions. We need to list for ourselves the privileges we see accorded, and readily accepted, all around us. We need to know, in our hearts, that what benefits us brings harm to others... and then we need to take action...to reject the privilege, to inspect our actions for presumptions of privilege, and to create in ourselves an adequate answer to our calling to respect the worth and dignity of every human being.

Sources:

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¹ Johnson, pp.46-47

² Transcribed directly from YouTube video by this author.

³ DeWolf, p. 75

⁴ DeWolf, pp. 143-144