

Preparation for White Privilege

In this country, we swim in a sea of white privilege. If we're white, we're like fish in water; we don't even notice it. If we're not white, then we're like cats in water; it's very uncomfortable, at best, and potentially fatal, at worst.

I grew up in the South, in the 1950s, where white supremacy had been made the law of the land. My family were modest, working-class whites who lived in small houses, drove older cars, and took for granted that people with dark skin were inferior. My grandmother's little house was always immaculately maintained, thanks in part to an African-American yard man. She didn't earn much money, but he earned little enough that she could afford his services.

When I was 3 or 4 years old, I learned a powerful word listening to my parents talk: *nigger*. I didn't know exactly what it meant, but I know who it applied to, so one Saturday I decided to try it out. I climbed up the porch railing and called out softly "Hey, nigger." The man flinched, looked down at his lawnmower and tried to pretend he hadn't heard me. So I called out louder "Hey, nigger!" This time, he looked up and simply said "Don't say that word, boy." The expression on his face told me all I needed to know about that word: it meant that even a 4-year-old white child had the power to injure a grown man with impunity, if the child was white and the man was dark.

I still remember this incident, decades later, because I immediately felt guilty for what I had just done. My parents might be racist, but I still had a child's sense of compassion and justice. I knew that this was not just. So, years later, when I was confronted with the term "white supremacy" as an adult, I bristled. I was no white supremacist – hadn't I felt the yard man's pain, and hadn't I repented of my cruelty? Didn't I still feel the guilt over it?

But that's not the way white supremacy works. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest says white privilege is largely hidden from our eyes if we are white. "Why? Because it is structural instead of psychological, and we tend to interpret most things in personal, individual, and psychological ways. Since we do not consciously have racist attitudes or overt racist behavior we kindly judge ourselves to be open minded, egalitarian, 'liberal,' and therefore surely not racist."

The idea of "white privilege" has been around for a long time. In the civil rights era, the term "white-skin privilege" was used. Later, many commentators discussed "institutional racism," the racist structures built into housing, education, and employment. Contemporary use of the term "white privilege" looks back to a 1988 article by Peggy McIntosh: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." She listed forty-six examples of white privilege. Here are a few, adapted:

- I can choose makeup or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over ... I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group where I am the only member of my race.

White privilege can be measured in economic terms. Columnist Michael Harriot measures education, employment, income, and spending. "If education is the key to success, then there is no debate that whites have the advantage in America." Black unemployment is significantly higher

than white unemployment, with black men paid almost 25% less than white men with the same years of work experience. Costs of groceries, mortgage rates and car insurance are all higher in poor black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods of the same average income.

The first steps in dismantling structural white privilege are to identify it, understand how it affects us, and then stand against it wherever it occurs. But it all starts with acknowledging that it exists.

White privilege refers to the collection of benefits that white people receive in a racially structured society in which they are at the top of the racial hierarchy. *Nicki Lisa Cole*

Given America's history, why should anyone be surprised to find white privilege so woven into the unexamined institutional practices, habits of mind, and received truths that [white] Americans can barely see it? *Michael K. Brown*

Privilege is the flipside of discrimination. If people of color face discrimination in housing, employment and elsewhere, then the rest of us are receiving a de facto subsidy, a privilege, an advantage in those realms of daily life. There can be no down without an up *Tim Wise*

The most radical action a white person can take is to acknowledge this denied privilege, to say, "Yes, you're right. In our institutional structures, and in deep psychological structures, our underlying assumption is that our lives are worth more than yours."

Michael Eric Dyson, Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America

White people and Black people are not having a discussion about race. Black people, thinking as a group, are talking about living in a racist system. White people, thinking as individuals, refuse to talk about "I, racist" and instead protect their own individual and personal goodness. In doing so, they reject the existence of racism. *John Metta*

Questions to Ponder

1. Watch a video about white privilege online. Search for "White Privilege Explained in Five Minutes" or paste this address into your browser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=na14F8dVTSw>. For another video, search for "Students learn a powerful lesson privilege" or paste this address into your browser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KlvmuxzYE>.
2. When did you first realize your race? Tell about how this happened.
3. When did you first understand the concept of unearned privilege? What were/are some of your feelings as at this time?
4. Define white privilege as you experience and understand it.
5. How can we all work to dismantle the invisible benefits of institutional racism?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe ways you understand and experience white privilege. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "I experience white privilege when I ..."