

White Privilege, Black Ice

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ January 13, 2008

How do you handle white privilege? My good friend Ted, a committed social justice activist, confided in me recently that he really did not think that he had experienced white privilege. He came from a town where the minority families were well integrated into the community. In fact, he noted, many made a lot more money than his family did. He never felt special because of his white maleness in any way that he could remember. Since he did not feel special, he did not realize his white privilege. But it is there, operating in the actions of ordinary people every day.

Do you recognize white privilege? White privilege is the sum of advantages, preferential treatment and institutional benefits granted to some folks solely on the basis of the color of their skin. Unfortunately, it is not something that many of us “feel.” It is under the radar of our consciousness. We take it for granted. In fact, in the United States it is so ingrained in our culture, that white privilege is almost invisible, - invisible specifically to white people and many times even invisible to minority groups as well. As a part of our culture it is a set of habits and assumptions that is overlooked every day. It is “black ice,” just about invisible but definitely very dangerous. White privilege perpetuates our racist society. More than overt racial hostility, more than explicit discrimination, white privilege is the invisible glue that keeps racism and oppression alive. Yes, more than overt racial hostility, more than explicit discrimination, white privilege is the invisible glue that keeps racism and oppression alive. In order to bring about true social change, we must recognize white privilege, identify it and work toward change. We must assert our theological beliefs in the everyday world. We must hold in useful regard our knowledge of our mutual interdependence.

An Hispanic woman recently noted that when she and her Caucasian husband were married, he had to recognize and give up his white privilege of being able to live anywhere that he could afford. Feel free to substitute Asian, Black, Serbian, or many other minority groups in this scenario.

When my beautiful and artistically talented Afro American daughter came home in tears one evening, I had to comfort her from the horrible words thrown at her: She was told that no black person would ever get a lead in the play at her school. It did not matter how much talent she had. The decision was made on the color of her skin. She had to accept a bit part. This was not written down; it was not even discussed directly. Yet, it was evident through the history of the school, the choices made by the teachers and the taunting of some of her classmates. After all how awful would it look for a black girl and a white boy to hold hands on stage!

For many years, clerks working service counters would ignore the black person in line, pointedly looking beyond the colored patron and addressing the next white person in line. The clerk would appropriately serve the Negro, but only after the white customers had been assisted. This behavior was typical and regarded as normal, good business functioning. That’s white privilege at work.

Today, how often do you notice an Hispanic person in a wait line, hanging back, allowing the white person to go in front. That’s white privilege at work.

Recently, at a local bus stop a nicely dressed, dark man sat by a white woman on the waiting bench. A bus driver walked by. The dark colored man asked “Excuse me sir. Can you tell me when the next #71 bus stops here?” The bus driver turned, looked through the man and continued walking, pointedly ignoring him. That’s white privilege at work.

Buses have long had a special relationship to white privilege. Consider the case of Montgomery, Alabama. I'll bet everyone here has heard of Rosa Parks, the woman that refused to give up her seat on a bus in December, 1955. But did you know that her act of righteous fatigue was not an impulsive stand? Did you know that it had happened before?

Twelve years before, in fact, in 1943. Back in 1943, Rosa Parks had been thrown off the bus by that very same driver for refusing to give up her seat. So far in 1955, three other women had already been arrested for refusing to get up for a white person.

What then, made this particular incident different? It just so happened that in 1955 the NAACP was looking for a good test case. The segregated seating policies on public buses had long been a source of resentment within the black community in Montgomery and in other cities throughout the Deep South. Negroes were required to pay their fares at the front of the bus and then get off the bus and re-board through the back door. The white bus drivers, who were invested with police powers, frequently harassed the black passengers, sometimes driving away before the Negroes were able to re-board the bus. During peak hours, the drivers pushed back the boundary markers that segregated the bus, crowding those in the "colored section" to provide more white passengers with seats.

Do you feel the white privilege at work? If you are secure in the unconscious knowledge that the bus driver would never do that to you, that is white privilege. Think of a rainy, cold winter day. The bus stops, hallelujah. You get in, put your money in the coin box and then you have to get out, go to the back door and reenter, all the time knowing that the bus driver just might decide to leave before you got on the bus.

When Rosa Parks refused to vacate her seat the driver called the police, and Mrs. Parks was arrested. She was convicted by the local court but refused to pay the fine of \$14. She lost her job and her husband also found it difficult to find work in Montgomery. Two years later they moved to Detroit.

A bittersweet story. But we are used to equating black with poor and the plight of Rosa Parks does not evoke outrage. That's white privilege at work. Have you ever pictured a group of black or Hispanic millionaires? Does it fit your visual image? If your answer is no, that's white privilege at work.

My good friend Jane adopted four interracial youngsters. She hated shopping with her children in the small town grocery. Why do you think? Because the clerks were instructed to keep an eye on every minority youngster inside the store. That's white privilege at work. White privilege is not living through the shame of having your children thought to be shoplifting just because of the color of their skin or the language that they speak.

When my three children were younger, my interracial family took a trip down south. Some waiters sabotaged our meals by waiting a very long time to serve us. They disapproved. Others were quite friendly, openly trying to show their acceptance of us. If you are black or Asian or Hispanic – you never know which kind of reception you will get. That's white privilege. White privilege is never having to be on guard lest someone hurt you in an otherwise ordinary encounter.

When you go into a store are you fairly sure that most of the people in that store will look like you? Do you worry about how you will be perceived? Will you be welcomed or ignored? If not, that is white privilege at work. For white people, there is no need to constantly have your guard up so that your, more tender than you would like, heart will not be hurt.

White privilege is never being put next to the kitchen in an empty restaurant: never seeing someone cross over to the other side of the street because you might be the “wrong” kind of person. White privilege is not having to worry that you will be told “You don’t belong here.” And, heaven forbid, white privilege is never being told that your child cannot join a club or get the lead in a play or have a dance partner because she is the wrong color.

White privilege is not, then, something you feel. If you are white, it is something you have. In this culture it is an assumed birthright. Even when you don’t want it, when you would like to say “No, I don’t want any arbitrary privilege that I have not earned” it is there for you. Because it is not about what you have. It is what others do not have. White privilege is what others do not have. They do not have the assurance of respect and inclusion. They lack the affirmation that they are valuable.

We are inculturated at such a young age. We grow up with values whose origins are hard to pinpoint. When I moved to Aptos one of my concerns was how I would react to being in such a homogeneous town. I knew that the number of minority persons was very small. When the question was asked as to why there were so few people of color in this community, I received many possible answers, mostly economic. Later I was told about a history in this area of discrimination laws against Chinese, Indian, Afro Americans. This might have something to do with the lack of ethnic diversity. You know, I don’t know whether or not these laws lasted into the near past, but it is my white privilege that makes it okay for me not to worry about it. After all, it doesn’t affect me.

Most folks can read body language. We get the silent language of raised eyebrows, words left unsaid, innuendo. When we moved here, it was clear that Watsonville was the step child. It was not usually recommended as a place to live, Sometimes we heard statements like “you can even find some nice places in Watsonville.” True, some of this disdain might be a class issue, but as sure as rain, some of it is familiar, old white privilege.

Last week I was in a discussion about this perception of Watsonville and was told that the part of the county that was re-named Royal Oaks was done in order to have an identity different from Watsonville. This is lore, an oral history, but it perpetuates the status of inferiority in the minds of those most affected by it.

On a more global level, I heard on NPR this week that many of our top international folks are concerned about South America because they now, for the first time, have a bunch of “dark skinned” leaders.

Eleanor Roosevelt is a personal hero. She fought tirelessly in the civil rights movement, often with views that were at odds with her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Even when he was afraid to offend the southern senators, she pressed on, often using her position and media sense to place her fight for civil rights in the forefront of the general public. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was so offended by her actions that he became convinced that she had black blood. Other Americans did as well and wrote to ask if this was true, only to receive a reply in which Mrs. Roosevelt said that her family had lived so long in the nation that she could not answer the question with certainty. What a wonderful response! Tell me, how would you feel if you suddenly learned that your family had black blood? That sinking feeling that some of you might own is another example of white privilege at work.

Eleanor Roosevelt understood white privilege. She fought it with her words, her pen and her presence. She understood the concept of respect and dignity for every person.

Today we are peeling away the layers of social injustice. Have we succeeded? Yes, of course we have moved in a positive direction. Have we reached our goal of a just society? No, of course not. At each new level, we must look around and ask ourselves, "What more must I do?" What can I do to take us to a deeper level? Let us identify those areas of ingrained white privilege and let us throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the fray.

Now at this point, you might ask: What good does it do to stand up here and preach to the choir, to Unitarian Universalists who have chosen to respect the worth and dignity of every person, every person regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage? I believe that it is just those people, the choir so to speak, the well meaning, white liberals that want to open themselves more fully to love and justice, that want to see beyond the superficial levels of race accommodation, - it is just those people who will ferret out the black ice, who will fight for new levels of affirmation of all human beings, not just a privileged few. It is this group, our group, who will go into a store filled only with white baby dolls and request that the store get a more representative group of dolls. "Excuse me, I'm looking for an Hispanic looking doll. Why don't we have any here? We have such a big Hispanic population." It is this group, our group, who will walk into a hospital whose walls are covered with pictures of white people and point out to the administrator, to the persons in charge, that those pictures are racist, that they do not reflect the community. It is this group, our group, who will patronize places of business with names such as "Gonzalez Bakery" or "Son Yen's Bicycle Repair." It is this group that will go beyond our stereotypes and bravely walk into new and slightly scary businesses. It is this group, it is our group, who will listen for the embedded message in the Freecycle ad: For Sale – Sombrero - Rust colored velvet with gold braid, sequins, etc. in nice condition, taking up too darn much space in Live Oak. It will make us cry! It is this group, our group that will point out the reporting inequities in the media. It is this group, our group, that when they say that they want to do outreach to the Hispanic population will recognize the need, the etiquette, the polity, the absolute necessity of learning Spanish. It is this group, our group, who will decide that having information printed in more than one language serves our whole community. It is this group, it is our group, it is this congregation, it is our congregations, that will delve into their hearts and lives and flush out acculturated privilege. It is this group that will lead the way in changing our world on a soulful basis. For if not us, then who?