Developing an Awareness of White Privilege

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Understanding what it means to be white requires a reshaping of one's worldview; a willingness to challenge oneself and others to disrupt the status quo of a privilege that oppresses. The journey to an awareness of white privilege is messy, imperfect, disconcerting, and lifelong. The awareness cannot stand alone; it must lead to action. It involves speaking out to break the silences that perpetuate racism and listening to painful stories of people from communities of color without offering up "perfectly logical explanations" to dismiss their experiences. The voices of the marginalized and oppressed call us forth to create racial justice.

I Am White

I am white. That statement encompasses worlds of meaning about which I have been ignorant most of my life.

I know now that I have accumulated immense amounts of power and privilege simply because of the color of my skin. Socially embedded in my white skin is a deeply layered assurance that I am worthy and competent and better than those who are not white. That assurance has been affirmed in my schooling, the media, my religion, my family, my work, and my government. No one ever had to say out loud to me *"You are worthy because you are white."* It is a part of the air I have breathed every day. It is what I have learned is at the core of who I am.

Orbiting the core are the privileges I have as a woman who is able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, highly educated, and upper middle class. Disrupting the orbit is my marginalized identity of being a woman. My advancing age has also begun to change how I am treated by others. All the privileges I have had in my life have not protected me from repeated sexual harassment or the horrors of domestic violence. They have not stopped the appearance of a cloak of invisibility that covers me as I become an elder in our culture. There is a cumbersome dance among my identities, the roles which I inhabit in the world, and how I try to understand it all.

I am an ordained minister belonging to a religious denomination with a long history of being involved in social justice and yet I abhor how the Christian church as an institution has used its dominance in ways that marginalize and harm others. As a woman in a misogynist culture, I have long simmering resentments against white men who have tried to keep me silent and mold me into subservient roles. As the mother of two white sons, I recognize they have been socialized into roles not always of their making. I have the benefit of multiple years of leadership experience in the corporate world and higher education in the United States. I also understand that organizational cultures mirror and reinforce the culture at large which means they are infused with whiteness and the injustice that occurs because of that. It is painful to realize that in all those years of leadership experience, I had never considered the question of my own race and how it affected others. It was only a couple of years ago that I began to understand the depth of the impact of whiteness.

I was at a social justice institute with a caucus of white student affairs administrators and staff as the facilitator asked us, " *What does it mean to be white?"* The circle was silent for some time; no one knew what to say. It was a question we hadn' t asked ourselves even though many of us considered ourselves social justice educators. As Rothenberg (2005) noted, whites when asked to reflect on when and how they learned about their race draw a blank. She explained:

> *"Many cannot remember a time when they first 'noticed' that they were white because whiteness was, for them, unremarkable. It was always everywhere. They*

> *learned to remark on 'difference' by noticing who was not like them. From an early age, race, for white people, is about everyone else."* (p. 2)

The *about everyone else* dynamic has permeated academia. "For decades, the gaze of white academia has been trained on those defined as *'other,'* whether using the terminology of race or ethnicity" (Garner, 2007, p. 5). I have participated in that gaze and evaluated the differences of the *other* on a scale normalized to whiteness. I took diversity trainings so I'd learn what "they" were like. I congratulated myself on gaining the knowledge that people who were Asian, Hispanic, African-American-those who were *other*-all thought and acted in *this* way as if the individuality of group members was nonexistent. The arrogance of it all still shocks me. Never would it occur to me to classify all white people in the same way but, then, never did it occur to me to think that I had a race or might be considered as *other* by others.

We were at the social justice institute because we wanted to better understand racism. I learned that our ignorance about whiteness is what we need to better understand. Thus began a journey that was not linear, was not comfortable and was not neatly contained.

Let the Water Flow: Developing an Awareness of Whiteness

I live in Seattle; a city that knows rain but knows it in mostly contained ways. One winter a deluge of rain, accompanied by rampant winds, created a furious flowing into unexpected places like business parks and city neighborhoods wreaking havoc along the way Things moored became afloat, attempts to hold the water back with sandbags were futile, creeks that were places to cool your feet became rushing torrents of danger, foundations slipped, sinkholes opened up and roads fell away.

To become fully engaged in antiracist work as a white person, I've had to open myself to the dissolution of the contained ways I've looked at life. I've needed to become unmoored with the rushing in of awareness that dislodges the foundations I've built. The roads I've previously walked on are no longer the ones I want to take and yet, I'm still in the midst of trying to make sense of the unexpected impact wrought by the flood, so the path ahead is not clear . I recognize that staying in and sorting through the messiness of this is a critical part of the work. All too often I get weary and want to simply move to another place. Then I remind myself of how I have the privilege to do that and that very fact is why it's so important that I don't move away. It is necessary to live in that place of discomfort and shifting boundaries.

Like Seattle knowing rain in contained ways, my awareness of racism has been primarily limited to tidy envelopes of knowledge that led me to feel compassionate about what "others" suffered. I kept myself "dry" in the midst of daily downpours of racism by individuals, institutions, and our culture. The reality is that I was disconnected from the flowing tears of those who face struggle simply because of the color of their skin.

Those tears have somehow seeped into my heart forcing it open in unexpected ways. I cry more now, having never been a person who comes to tears easily. There is less of a boundary up when I hear painful stories and I weep unexpectedly. There's less distance between the witnessing of racism and the impact on my heart, allowing me to more quickly speak up and risk saying what might possibly open up someone else' s heart. It' s not always a gentle insertion. Sometimes it requires me to be like a rushing torrent that again and again challenges injustice even as people try to sandbag me.

I say let the foundations be shaken and the roads be rearranged. Let the water flow .

Feeling Afraid Versus Feeling Safe

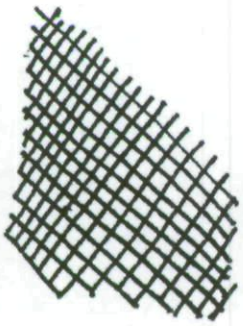
I wrote a reflection piece on white privilege and ended it with an Audre Lorde quote. "I'd like to know more about how you feel about the quote with which you ended your reflection," said a friend. She was challenging me to more deeply explore the anxiety that was beginning to surface as I

began to engage in antiracist work. The quote was:

> *"When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid"* (Lorde, 1997, p. 13).

How I feel is afraid and inadequate. I feel overwhelmed and doubtful about what difference I can make as one person. I'm concerned I might cause more harm than good. I worry about doing anti-racist work in the "right" way knowing that my ignorance as a white person will continue to offend others who have been insulted and harmed by racist attitudes and actions all of their lives. I understand that I will continue to be racist.

How I'd like to feel is safe and protected from those fears. Because safe is generally what I know on a day-to-day basis. Because safe is what I expect on a day-to-day basis. My expectation of daily safeness highlights the privilege I constantly experience that often differs from the experiences of people of color



This became clear to me at an institute on racism. Split into racial caucuses, we developed group guidelines for how we would do our work together. Our white group came up with an extensive bulleted list of how we would communicate and work with each other. The people of color group had a short list: speak the truth, risk, don't hold back. It wasn't until later in the workshop that we white participants understood that our very complex list was designed to keep us safe from any challenge or pain that would take us outside our comfort zones.

The people of color were curious about our definition of safe. It didn't take much conversation for the whites to recognize that our ideas and experiences about being safe differed dramatically from many of their experiences. We realized that we never had to worry about being stopped by police because of the color of our skin. We had no history of suspecting store staff of following or harassing us because of our race. We didn't have to be concerned that our race would impact our ability to secure financial resources.We never had to think about our children being vulnerable simply because of the color of their skin. We didn't get stopped at airport security checks.

Now, when I find myself thinking about creating a safe environment, I ask questions about what that means, for whom am I making it safe and why When I enter into a discussion about racism, I'm more realistic in acknowledging that speaking the truth is risky behavior and I likely won't feel safe.

I was disturbed when a tenured white professor from a higher education counseling program spoke during a symposium on race about how he hired faculty . After lamenting the difficulty of finding people of color to fill positions, he acknowledged that the reality is he has one primary goal in mind when he does hiring: "More than age, ethnicity , race, and gender, I look for someone who is going to ensure the classroom is a safe environment." I don't know if he heard the collective gasp in the room or not. I felt as if I had been hit in the gut as I interpreted his statement to mean that anyone, whose presence caused discomfort in the classroom, whether because of the color of their skin, their gender , their age or what they said, would not be welcome in his teaching environment. I wondered how safe this white man's colleagues of color felt in that moment. I wondered what message the students were learning about being safe.

I've recognized a distinction that has caused me to redefine "safe" as I do this work. The truth is I will remain safe in fundamental ways, with my basic needs met, in spite of what I say or do because that is what my whiteness guarantees me in this culture. Whiteness has given me opportunities in education, job opportunities, and financial resources that were not available to many others because their skin was not white. Those opportunities have given me a secure foundation which will sustain me even if trials come my way . As I write these words, I experience a sense of sorrow that others cannot write the same words about themselves. All people are entitled to feel safe in this way.

I understand I will not be safe from my fears and doubts and the possibilities of failure while doing antiracist work. Friends and family

may think differently of me, colleagues may make judgments, angry words might hurt my feelings and actions by others may temporarily force me off track. But, I have whole cultural and institutional systems that will ensure I remain privileged because it is the nature of those systems to maintain the status quo. It is within those systems that, as a white person, I experience daily the benefits of the color of my skin being white.

The Bible says that to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48). I take this as a prophetic call, particularly to those of us who are white, to become partners with all who strive daily to create racial equity . We are given power by the system. We have a choice about how and for what we use that power.

I've decided it is okay to feel afraid. Antiracism is big work with many critical challenges inherent within it. What is not okay is to retreat back into my safe place while others are suffering. There are occasionally days where I stop long enough to be quiet for a bit. It is at those times that I hear more clearly the unceasing echoes of the voices of those who are oppressed. Their stories surround me clamoring for a response.As the call to respond grows within me, there is very little room left to be afraid. I respond imperfectly in spite of the fearTo remain silent perpetuates injustice and that frightens me the most.

"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak." Audre Lorde (1978)

Learning to Speak

There are signs I've learned to acknowledge that are telling me "it is better to speak." In the midst of a conversation, when my stomach flutters begin and the heart palpitations increase, I know that something wrong is occurring and needs to be addressed. While my mind races to create perfectly logical explanations to excuse what has just occurred or been said, my body wisdom insists that I speak and respond to the uneasiness I feel without rationalizing it away One example of this occurred in a weekly staff meeting of administrators on my university campus.

A person made a comment I interpreted as biased and hurtful to people of a particular social identity; several of my colleagues who were present claimed that identity. There was a tense silence after he spoke. The stomach fluttering started and accelerated as I looked around at the faces in the group. I did not know what to say. I knew I had to say something. "Wow, it's really hard for me to hear that," came stumbling out of my mouth. I didn't know what would come next. The next few words spoken were less important. What *was* important was to interrupt the stand his words had taken in the room that reflected the privilege out of which he lived and not the oppression which many of my colleagues faced daily. Letting the comment pass unchallenged would perpetuate the tendency to let discomfort and fear silence a response. It is better to speak and stir up the pot that wants to stay stagnant in a status quo of privilege.

After the meeting, two things happened. Several colleagues later expressed their gratitude for me challenging the comment which they experienced as discriminatory and hurtful. I made an appointment to meet with the person who made the comment to ask questions about why he said what he did, and we had a stimulating discussion on the issue.

On thing I learned from this is that my most authentic contribution in such situations is often my own emotional experience of it. This keeps me from falling into the trap of making possibly erroneous assumptions about what the speaker actually meant and leaves the possibility for dialogue more open. My study of emotional intelligence has greatly increased my capacity to recognize, claim, and name what I am experiencing in the moment and I can respond with more integrity.

The most important thing I learned from this, and other similar experiences, is how important it is for me to utilize my privileged positions to speak out as the ramifications of such actions for me are not even close to what often exists for people of color . No one has ever called me an angry white woman or said that I speak for all white people. No one has ever blamed my behavior or words on the color

of my skin. It is because of such privilege that I must speak.

So, I stumble into speech unsure of whether it will be welcomed, heard, or understood, but trusting that it is often better to speak than remain silent. Conversely I have also learned that there are times where remaining silent and listening with an open heart is critical.

Learning to Listen and Believe

I remember the day the non-traditional aged student of color came to my office to talk. She told of classroom and general campus life experiences where she felt shut out, shut down and dismissed as a woman of color. This was the first of many discussions we had. It's difficult to admit how many *logical* explanations for her experiences were being created in my mind as she shared her stories; it was tempting to speak those explanations to stop the flow of disheartening stories. I didn't want to acknowledge this kind of behavior was happening on the campus of a university steeped in values of justice and proud of its diverse student body. I wanted to believe she was an angry black woman blowing things out of proportion because that was what the whiteness curriculum of life had taught me to believe. Something kept me silent and held an open space inside that, little by little, let in more of the stories of pain. I then talked with other students and staff of color. I heard similar stories. I was resistant. I was sad. I didn't know immediately that the most important thing I could do was to feel the pain connected to such experiences; feel it deep down in my core so that I would never again let easy rationalizations crowd out the grief of what it was like for a person of color living in a racist culture.

One of the legacies of whiteness I experience is an illusion that I can fix most anything and control situations if I just try hard enough. My immediate response to stories of pain is to move past them and focus on making it better. That can be a trap. Staying with the pain of stories of racism can teach me in ways that facts and theories cannot.

Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) advocate for the development of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills as an incremental process for gaining multicultural competency that can then lead to effective action. I try not to skip those important first steps of developing an in-depth awareness and a grounded knowledge of the realities of racism before moving to developing skills that will lead me to action.

At the same time, I know what it is to get caught with my new awareness of whiteness in a whirlpool of swirling blame and guilt that circles endlessly and prevents me from making true progress towards change. Staying in such a whirlpool can itself be an act of privilege that provides a convenient, albeit often painful, excuse from taking those actions necessary to create racial justice.

Once again, the cumbersome dance presents itself. When to speak, when to stay silent. When to feel the pain, when to push through it to action. The dance requires partners. Doing this work is not a solitary venture. We need to be allies for each other, offering both encouragement and challenge as we strive to create a more just and humane world.

Working for Justice

Understanding my privilege and its impact on others is a lifelong journey on behalf of justice. I know that how I engage in that journey has ramifications for the others around me whether they are the students I see on a daily basis, my colleagues, my family or strangers I meet. Each encounter has the possibility of being a learning moment if I am alert to how privilege plays out on a daily basis. Each moment also has the capacity to cause harm to others because of my ignorance.

To reduce that ignorance, I continue to educate myself to be aware and understand the individual, cultural, and institutional manifestations of whiteness. I am guided by the lessons I have learned thus far.

I know the importance of developing a critical consciousness with which I examine daily how my privilege has influenced my behavior and the behavior of others towards me. I've learned that perhaps the best education I can hope to offer to others about issues of

privilege is the modeling of my own imperfect but persistent attempt to work for racial justice.

I know that learning about racism and whiteness is my own responsibility and not something that people of color have responsibility for teaching me. White people need to do their own work in these areas while ensuring they are not insulated from the experiences of people of color I take seriously the advice from my colleagues in the people of color caucus at the social justice institute: speak the truth, risk, don't hold back. I know that silence is a powerful tool in maintaining privilege and racism, so I push myself to break those silences.

I have experienced the power of stories to change people's perceptions in ways that litanies of facts often cannot. I am willing to be vulnerable in sharing my own stories of imperfection and longing and know the deep rewards of listening attentively to the stories of others. I remember that some of the most powerful stories are told through music and poetry and other forms of art.

I keep in mind that contemplation of all of these things without action is an empty promise and that action without contemplation is a fool's path and a dangerous one for its impact on others. The journey is difficult and so the developing of allies along the way is crucial. We can be lenses for each other in those places we cannot yet see for ourselves.

The paths we take towards creating racial justice will be as different as the people we are and the roles we play . Yet, there are possibilities for convergence as awareness and action grows in multiple disciplines and professions. Such convergence has the power to create real change. It is that awareness that gives me hope, a vital quality in the struggles for justice.

Holly Near, a singer and songwriter activist, wrote a song called *I Am Willing* that captures the commitment to work for justice. I sing these words to myself when I get weary or discouraged:

I am open, I am willing.
To be hopeless, would be so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us,
so lift me up to the light of change.

There is something about knowing that I am part of a much larger community of people working for change that inspires me to continue the journey. The voices of the mar ginalized and oppressed, crying out for liberation, pull me forward.

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