How I Came to Understand White Privilege

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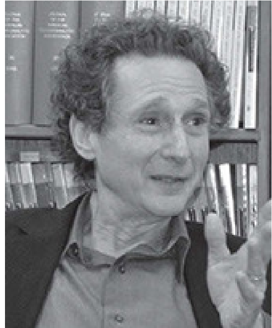

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"When I call your name, come to the front of the class and form a circle," my first grade teacher Mrs. Wright announced. We were going to learn to read.

I waited anxiously, barely able to sit. I was not called and continued drawing warships in battle. Then the first group returned to their seats and a second group was called. I was not in it. I ran to Mrs. Wright and begged, "I want to learn to read."

"You'll be in the next group," she said.

It soon became clear that the next group was the "gifted" group. I didn't know how this group was chosen. I don't remember any tests, though there may have been one. I do remember that in the third group the girls seemed snootier, and no one wore torn or dirty clothes as some did in the other groups. This is my first memory of privilege, benefiting from an unearned advantage by belonging to a group. Not only was I chosen, I had felt entitled to ask. Not everyone did. It was not exactly white privilege. Everyone in the school was white, and everyone in the town was white. In a way I was less than white. Of the approximately 300 students and 20 or so teachers and staff at the elementary school, I was the only Jew—and I was seldom allowed to forget it.

It was rare to walk the five minutes to school or back home without being taunted, "Dirty Jew," "Christ killer," "Kike." The words were often accompanied by punches and sometimes by beatings. It was the same on the play-ground. Yet somehow I knew I'd get through it, that this childhood would be escaped, and I would emerge relatively powerful and privileged. Perhaps it was because at some level, even at age six, I knew that my parents, aunts, uncles and cousins had suffered much worse anti-Semitism and had gone on to achieve enough success to garner respect. Perhaps it was because watching television with my parents or relatives always involved calling out, "You know he/she is a Jew." Milton Berle, Phil Silvers, Melvyn Douglas, Lauren Bacall, Shelly Winters, the Marx brothers, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter Lorre, Paul Newman, Sammy Davis Jr, Benny Goodman, Jascha Heifetz, Justice Brandeis, Einstein and Dr. Grawi.

Dr. Grawi was our neighbor in a grand house on a hill I passed every day on the way to school. He had fled Germany in the '30s and was now a modestly prosperous GP who drove to the city for opera and theater. My parents independently and repeatedly said about him, "They could take away everything, but they couldn't take away his education," which I took to mean, if you do well in school you can always find some place to live well, even if means fleeing thousands of miles to an alien culture to be safe.

I never doubted I would escape the oppressive, often violent place of my childhood. Though the town was only a two-hour drive from New York City, in the '50s it was more an impoverished Appalachian town than an exurb. It still is. In 1828, it become a canal town—rechristened Port Jervis—just before the decline of the canals; then a railroad town before the decline of the railroad. It was a factory town until the flight of the factories. And when the highways came, they passed Port Jervis by.

Because my father was a plumber and owned a small plumbing supply store, we lived in the poorest part of town, and we were poor. But because we were Jewish most neighbors thought we were rich, which bestowed another kind of privilege. Most of my classmates' parents worked in the factories or were laborers. Many were descendants of French Huguenot and Dutch settlers, now poor white. Others were children and grandchildren of Irish and Italian immigrants. Very few expressed any interest in leaving the area, whatever their talents. Diane, my first crush, the smartest student in school—I knew because I looked through the principal's files when I was in detention—got pregnant and left school when she was 14. Some of the Christian kids planned to go to college. Most of those were the children of the professional class, the doctors and lawyers. Of those who left many returned, some to join their father's practice, others to start their own.

My parents made light of local anti-Semitism. It was nothing like they had suffered back home. My father did not come to my defense or teach me how to fight back. "Ignore what they say. It's just words. They're ignorant. They're jealous. This is a country of laws," were some of the things he said. As new citizens my parents knew their rights and their privileges. They taught us not to trust authority. It could be challenged, not flamboyantly, but by the law. "You can always call your lawyer," was an essential part of the talk. I'll say more about the talk later.

Conspiracy of Silence

The first important black person in my life was Malcolm X. I'm not sure how it happened. Maybe because of his "chickens coming home to roost" comment after the Kennedy assassination, saying what no one else dared speak. Maybe it was something my sister-at-college said. Maybe it was by way of Muhammad Ali. I know I heard Malcolm's Oxford Union debates in 1964. I was in awe of how he spoke out against his racist oppressors and by

the intellectual precision of his rage, like Moses to the Pharaoh. I wished he were my father. Then in 1965, my first year of high school, he was killed, and I wondered again, as when Kennedy was killed, did heroes have to die?

> *Did your mother or father ever give you the talk, the talk about the dangers of a world in which more people have been killed by their own governments than at the hands of the enemy during war? If neither did, then they are either in denial, or they are very white.*

After leaving home, through college and graduate school, I met, but did not get to know. a few black students. This was in the revolutionary ’60s and early ’70s and they were most often radical, like me. I assumed, that like Malcolm X, they felt they had the right to speak truth to power, and that they could rely on the law to defend them, as could I. It was not until my second internship and first job at the West Haven VA, working closely with black nurse’s aides, and black and brown Vietnam veterans, that I learned how careful and fearful black and brown people often are. Low-keyed at work, the aides never questioned a doctor’s or a nurse’s decision even when they knew better. It was different outside of work when some talked to me about their anger and discontent. I did not quite get that what I was seeing was institutional racism and white privilege, covered by a conspiracy of silence. At first I attributed it to class and education. Then I saw it in a way I could not deny.

Everyone who was working at the new VA Vietnam Vet Center was attending a training conference in a white suburb of St. Louis. After dinner Dan Campbell and I went for a walk. Dan was a black Vietnam vet with a master’s in counseling who worked with me planning the New Haven Vet Center. After walking and talking for a while, he said to me, “I couldn’t walk here alone.” I asked and Dan explained. It’s a screen memory, I’m sure, an après coup, coalescing what I saw and did not want to see because it implicated me among the privileged. Dan did not grow up with his teachers assuming he was smart, with his white neighbors assuming he was rich. Dan, a sweet and mild man, was assumed to be dangerous and was the object of their fear and rage. Maybe I was not the whitest white, but I was white enough to pass, white enough to feel free to walk where I wanted and say what I wanted, and white enough to know if things got rough, I could pick up and leave.

I needed to do something. Around 1984 I started psychoanalytic training at NYU postdoc. I asked for a meeting with the director of the program, Bernie Kalinkowitz. I expressed my concern about the relative absence of black psychoanalysts. He agreed and introduced me to Kirkland Vaughans, a black first-year student, who had expressed similar concerns. We then became co-chairs of the first psychoanalytic diversity committee. As we were getting to know each other, he told me about the racism he had borne in the course of his education to become a psychologist and psychoanalyst. When I said, “You should talk about it. You should tell people,” he’d smile and nod. Over the years I heard similar stories from other black psychoanalytic colleagues who often added something like, “I’m used to it. What good would it do?” Then in the light of Barack Obama’s presidency, I suggested Black Psychoanalysts Speak, and no one I asked to participate said no.

While reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me,* a talk to his son about being a black man in America, and about its dangers, I realized I had received a talk of sorts from my parents as well. Like Coates’s it took place over time. The content was different, though like Coates’s it did include, “Don’t trust police just because they’re police.” But it did imply you could rely on the law. Also, “Know your lawyer. Bribery is sometimes necessary. Keep your passport current. Have some cash, gold and jewelry in the safe. Get an education you can take with you. It can happen here.”

White privilege has shades. Did your mother or father ever give you the talk, the talk about the dangers of a world in which more people have been killed by their own governments than at the hands of the enemy during war? If neither did, then they are either in denial, or they are very white. You are very white if you think it can’t happen here, because it happened here and continues to happen right now. It happened to the native people, to those in slavery, to Japanese-Americans. It is happening now to those who have spent years in Guantanamo without trial, to the many thousands who are imprisoned without reason, to the millions too poor to buy decent food or get medical care, to the refugees we turn away. I’ve told my children. Have you?