

June 22 2000

Membership Has It's Privileges: Thoughts on Acknowledging and Challenging Whiteness

By Tim Wise

Being white means never having to think about it. James Baldwin said that many years ago, and it's perhaps the truest thing ever said about race in America. That's why I get looks of bewilderment whenever I ask, as I do when lecturing to a mostly white audience: "what do you like about being white?"

Never having contemplated the question, folks take a while to come up with anything.

We're used to talking about race as a Black issue, or Latino, Asian, or Indian problem. We're used to books written about "them," but few that analyze what it means to be white in this culture. Statistics tell of the disadvantages of "blackness" or "brownness" but few examine the flipside: namely, the advantages whites receive as a result.

When we hear about things like racial profiling, we think of it in terms of what people of color go through, never contemplating what it means for whites and what we don't have to put up with. We might know that a book like *The Bell Curve* denigrates the intellect of blacks, but we ignore the fact that in so doing, it elevates the same in whites, much to our advantage in the job market and schools, where those in authority will likely view us as more competent than persons of color.

That which keeps people of color off-balance in a racist society is that which keeps whites in control: a truism that must be discussed if whites are to understand our responsibility to work for change. Each thing with which "they" have to contend as they navigate the waters of American life, is one less thing whites have to sweat: and that makes everything easier, from finding jobs, to getting loans, to attending college.

On a personal level, it has been made clear to me repeatedly:

Like the time I attended a party in a white suburb and one of the few black men there announced he had to leave before midnight, fearing his trip home--which required that he travel through all-white neighborhoods--would likely result in being pulled over by police, who would wonder what he was doing out so late in the "wrong" part of town.

He would have to be cognizant--in a way I would not--of every lane change, every blinker he did or didn't remember to use, whether his lights were too bright, or too dim, and whether he was going even 5 miles an hour over the limit: as any of those could serve as pretexts for pulling one over, and those pretexts are used regularly for certain folks, and not others.

The virtual invisibility that whiteness affords those of us who have it is like psychological money in the bank, the proceeds of which we cash in every day while others are in a state of perpetual overdraft.

Yet, it isn't enough to see these things, or think about them, or come to appreciate what whiteness means: though important, this enlightenment is no end in itself. Rather, it is what we do with the knowledge and understanding that matters.

If we recognize our privileges, yet fail to challenge them, what good is our insight? If we intuit discrimination, yet fail to speak against it, what have we done to rectify the injustice?

And that's the hard part: because privilege tastes good and we're loath to relinquish it. Or even if willing, we often wonder how to resist: how to attack unfairness and make a difference.

As to why we should want to end racial privilege--aside from the moral argument--the answer is straightforward: The price we pay to stay one step ahead of others is enormous. In the labor market, we benefit from racial discrimination in the relative sense, but in absolute terms this discrimination holds down most of our wages and living standards by keeping working people divided and creating a surplus labor pool of "others" to whom employers can turn when the labor market gets tight or workers demand too much in wages or benefits.

We benefit in relative terms from discrimination against people of color in education, by receiving, on average, better resources and class offerings. But in absolute terms, can anyone deny that the creation and perpetuation of miseducated persons of color harms us all?

And even disparate treatment in the justice system has its blowback on the white community. We may think little of the racist growth of the prison-industrial complex, as it snares far fewer of our children. But considering that the prisons warehousing black and brown bodies compete for the same dollars needed to build colleges for everyone, the impact is far from negligible.

In California, since 1980, nearly 30 new prisons have opened, compared to two four-year colleges, with the effect that the space available for people of color and whites to receive a good education has been curtailed. So folks fight over the pieces of a diminishing pie--as with Proposition 209 to end affirmative action--instead of uniting against their common problem: the mostly white lawmakers who prioritize jails and slashing taxes on the wealthy, over meeting the needs of most people.

As for how whites can challenge the system--other than by joining the occasional demonstration or voting for candidates with a decent record on race issues--this is where we'll need creativity.

Imagine, for example, that groups of whites and people of color started going to local department stores as discrimination "tester" teams. And imagine the whites spent a few hours, in shifts, observing how they were treated relative to the black and brown folks who came with them. And imagine what would happen if every white person on the team approached a different white clerk and returned just-purchased merchandise, if and when they observed disparate treatment, explaining they weren't going to shop in a store that

profiled or otherwise racially discriminated. Imagine the faces of the clerks, confronted by other whites demanding equal treatment for persons of color.

Far from insignificant, if this happened often enough, it could have a serious effect on behavior, and the institutional mistreatment of people of color in at least this one setting: after all, white clerks could no longer be sure if the white shopper in lady's lingerie was an ally who would wink at unequal treatment, or whether they might be one of "those" whites: the kind that would call them out for doing what they always assumed was acceptable.

Or what about setting up "cop watch" programs like those already in place in a few cities? White folks, following police, filming officer's interactions with people of color, and making their presence known, when and if they observe officers engaged in abusive behavior.

Or contingents of white parents, speaking out in a school board meeting against racial tracking in class assignments: a process through which kids of color are much more likely to be placed in basic classes, while whites are elevated to honors and advanced placement, irrespective of ability. Protesting this kind of privilege--especially when it might be working to the advantage of one's own children--is the sort of thing we'll need to do if we hope to alter the system we swear we're against.

We'll have to stop moving from neighborhoods when "too many" people of color move in.

We'll have to stop running to private schools, or suburban public ones, and instead fight to make the schools serving all children in our community better.

We'll need to consider taking advantage of the push for publicly funded charter schools by joining with parents of color to start institutions of our own, similar to the "Freedom Schools" established in Mississippi by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1964. These schools would teach not only traditional subject matter, but also the importance of critical thinking, and social and economic justice. If these are things we say we care about, yet we haven't at present the outlets to demonstrate our commitment, we'll have to create those institutions ourselves.

And we must protest the privileging of elite, white male perspectives in school textbooks. We have to demand that the stories of all who have struggled to radically transform society be told: and if the existing texts don't do that, we must dip into our own pockets and pay for supplemental materials that teachers could use to make the classes they teach meaningful.

And if we're in a position to make a hiring decision, we should go out of our way to recruit, identify and hire a person of color.

What these suggestions have in common--and they're hardly an exhaustive list--is that they require whites to leave the comfort zone to which we have grown accustomed. They require time, perhaps money, and above all else, courage; and they ask us to focus a little less on the relatively easy, though important, goal of "fixing" racism's victims (with a bit more money for this or that, or a little more affirmative action), and instead to pay attention to the need to challenge and change the perpetrators of and collaborators with the system of racial privilege. And those are the people we work with, live with, and wake up to every day. It's time to revoke the privileges of whiteness.