

## **ACKNOWLEDGING AND EXPLORING PRIVILEGE**

Over the last few years my daughter Liliana, who works in the field of social justice and diversity, has been helping me to deepen my understanding of the systemic societal inequities in which we are immersed. Becoming conscious of the inherent privileges that are sewn into the fabric of my social world is an essential step in being less contributory to the unfairness of the system. In a fair social system, the privilege of the few would become the rights of all.

As a student and teacher of awareness for many years, my focus has been on growing our individual capacity for awakened consciousness of our bodies, feelings, thoughts, relationships and environment. Only recently have I been attending more consciously to the ways our cultural biases impact these abilities. I believe that the road toward individual and collective freedom is paved with awareness. This road must include becoming more conscious of assumed rights that are implicit for the dominant cultural groups (e.g. white, male, heterosexual, upper and middle-class) and how this is radically different for non-dominant groups. These assumed rights are the territory of “privilege”.

We live in unfair social systems, which have deeply imbedded biases. The cultural euphemism that says we are all free to create our own destiny, while true in an absolute sense, ignores how the playing field is not level from the beginning.

I notice that many people find the concept of inherent privilege unhelpful, in that it implies an elimination of personal responsibility for the choices one makes in life. They accurately point out that we all have advantages and disadvantages based on our genetics, family systems, place of birth, etc. and it is our personal task in life to transform our situation into “the unlimited potential of the future”. Privilege is also derided as a “guilt trip” assumed by liberally oriented people in response to accusations directed by marginalized populations.

I feel it is essential that we differentiate “advantages” from “privilege”. While having cultural privilege has many advantages, not all advantages require privilege. Having literate parents, books in the home, conversation around the dinner table are advantages. Having a superior school down the street because of one’s economic status is an example of privilege. Having a healthy, mobile body is an advantage, having easy accessibility to most

public environments is privilege. Experiencing a safe home environment is an advantage, experiencing the presence of a police officer as an obvious sign of protection and safety is an expression of privilege.

Again, in my opinion, for society to become “just”, the naturally assumed privilege of the few must become the rights and, therefore, the privilege, of the many. These distinctions are difficult to define yet very important. In acknowledging privilege, I am neither diminishing our individual capacity for transcending life situations nor am I imagining a world in which we all have the same advantages. Rather, I am pointing toward an obvious truth: societies have unacknowledged, unspoken and denied biases.

In responding effectively to some of the cultural and political movements alive in the world today, it is essential that we acknowledge the institutional, cultural, and personal/interpersonal racism, sexism, classism and other “isms”, in which we are living. Without this acknowledgement and a creative response to the systemic (meaning of a system) oppression, we will perpetuate these cultural wars for generations to come. Also, as I will describe later, this acknowledgement is as helpful, essential, and life transforming for those in positions of dominance as for the oppressed.

### **Definitions of Privilege:**

*Restricted right or benefit:*

*- A right or benefit that is not available to everyone*

*Rights and advantages enjoyed by elite*

*- The rights and advantages enjoyed by a relatively small group of people usually as a result of wealth or social status*

*-Systematic favoring, enriching, valuing, validating, and including of certain social identities over others. **Individuals cannot “opt out” of systems of privilege; rather these systems are inherent to the society in which they live***

I have many unearned privileges:

**I have white skin**, which in offers me special status in my country of origin and in much of the world. When I enter a restaurant or place of business, I assume that I am welcome. People of other skin colors are often viewed with suspicion or even hostility. When I see a person in a police uniform walking down the street, I do not feel endangered or suspect.

**I have a male body**, which in primate evolutionary history affords me more power and greater access to resources than my female counterparts. I have never been threatened with sexual violence or treated uncomfortably as a sexual object. I have never been told overtly or covertly that any position in society was unattainable to me.

**I have a heterosexual identity**, which means my sexual orientation has never been questioned or devalued. I have never felt threatened by the way I walk, talk or dress or by expressing affection in public. I do not experience people looking at me with derision or questioning my moral character based on my sexual orientation.

**I was born into a middle-class family**, which afforded me consistent access to food, shelter, quality education and protection from hostile environments. I never had to go to school hungry or worry about the quality of my drinking water or about being attacked by neighborhood gangs. I also grew up with the explicit and implicit implication that my standing in the world, economically and socially, could and would improve.

**I have a healthy body**, without obvious disability, which means I never had to confront being unable to enter a building due to inaccessibility. My capacity to move easily through life situations has always been assumed. When I want to meet with someone, either socially or for my occupation, I know that I can gain access to our meeting place. This implicit accessibility contributed to the sense that I could go anywhere and be almost anything.

As a relatively rich, well-educated, healthy, heterosexual, white, male, my path in life has been easier than many others. It is true that I have worked diligently for many of the gifts in my current life; still it is important that my inherent privileges not be overlooked. Through the media, I grew up with many images of success and possibility that looked like me. The messages “you can be what you want to be”, “if you can dream it you can be it”, and “the sky is the limit” were consistently given to me.

### **Imaginative Exercise**

Imagine that there are basketball hoops lining a wall of a gym. These hoops represent fulfilling your dreams or success in various areas of life. Imagine that fifty people of different cultural, racial and economic backgrounds and

sexual identities are standing at mid-court facing the baskets. We are then asked to:

- Take one step forward if you have felt welcomed in most social and business environments and one step back if not (don't move either way if neutral for this and all the following).
- Take one step forward if you had good teachers and access to quality learning materials in most of your schooling and one step back if not.
- Take one step forward if you lived in basically safe, secure environments growing up and one step back if not.
- Take one step forward if you have felt safe sexually almost all of the time and one step back if not.
- Take one step forward if you received messages and saw many role models suggesting that you could be anything that you chose to be and one step back if not.
- Take one step forward if you were encouraged and supported by the people outside your family toward a successful life and one step back if not.
- Take one step forward if you had access to financial support when needed and one step back if not.

You see where this is going and can imagine your own examples. You are then given a ball and asked to shoot for your dreams, for success. I am standing right in front of the basket; my female friends of color who were born into poor homes are at the other end of the gym. Others are some place in between us. We all shoot the ball. We are all told that everyone has the right and opportunity to make a basket.

**This is called privilege.**

I believe it is healthy and respectful to assume an attitude of self-responsibility in this life. Blaming others for our difficulties is inherently disempowering.

AND

It is essential that we acknowledge the uneven playing field and take actions to minimize the effects of social injustice. In addition to laws that prevent overt bias, we can individually and collectively keep attuned to the systemic biases that infect our cultural life. This is a big task.

Our biases are built into our biology, our neural networks. From pre-human primate bands, to hunter-gathering groups, to tribes, to nations and seek dominance in terms of access to resources, which includes food, shelter, procreative potential, and anything that is collectively valued. We are also designed to see those outside our tribal/national group, any “other”, as threatening and alien. While the impulse toward cooperation is also part of our DNA, this is usually limited by very specific boundaries. Some cultural systems tend to encourage these biases more than others, for example, the rise of capitalism in the United States required white supremacy as justification for the destruction of Native Americans and for slavery.

Still, biology is NOT destiny. Those of us in positions of social dominance – white males in particular – have a strong responsibility to acknowledge and do our best not to support or ignore (ignoring is supporting!) the systems of injustice that surround us. Whether it is the devaluing of women and femininity, jokes about “LGBTQ people” people or assumptions about people with skin colors that differ from our own, we need to be on the front lines of standing up for the respect of all beings. At a minimum, this asks us to engage in the uncomfortable task of noticing our own biases, speaking of them openly and calling attention to any expressions of pre-judging in our social groups. This means ALL pre-judging. In my circles, this means to say something when people assume that all Trump supporters are ignorant or racist.

One of the most important learning’s for me in my “street retreat” with the ZenPeacemakers in which we lived and slept on the streets of San Francisco without any money was to see my assumptions about the “street people”. I carried a lot of fear and disrespect in my mind that dissolved through genuine interaction. People living on the street are as diverse as people anywhere; they are not of one type. This is obvious theoretically, yet I needed to experience this truth to overcome my prejudice.

In addition, while humor is a helpful tool in unmasking these systemic patterns, often unconscious attitudes of superiority are expressed through

jokes. People of privilege need to be more observant and circumspect than those from more marginalized groups. I used to say “well aren’t we all equally entitled to speak freely?”. For example, if an African-American comedian can make jokes about white people, can’t a white comedian, just as readily, make jokes about black people? Well, “no”. In my opinion, by observing the implicit power differentials, those in positions of power need to be both more circumspect and more humble.

None of us will ever be safe and at home in our cultures until ALL human beings feel valued implicitly. Those of us who seem to “gain” from the biases need to see that much of our social fear and anxiety arises from these imbalances.

While we must hold people responsible for their actions, we can also stand up for injustices base on systemic patterns of devaluation and oppression. *The task of awakening beings is to transcend and transmute the biological tendencies and tribal biases of our forbearers. For life on earth to thrive, a critical mass of us need to make an evolutionary leap into inclusion of ALL life as part of “US”.*

White, male privilege is real and needs to be acknowledged. We also need to be mindful of the potential for the disrespect in lowering expectations for people who have been treated inequitably. When teachers expect less from African-American children, we all lose. There truly is a “tyranny of lowered expectations” that we do not want to support. In my opinion, this is another form of disrespect and discrimination. Taking white, male privilege seriously, means to recognize the systemic effects of discrimination over many generations while still holding true to our commitment to the unique creative potentials in each individual. Creating equal opportunity requires us to look toward how to make opportunity equitable until it can truly be equal.

My responsibility is to use my privilege to help educate and bring into dialogue others who are not acknowledging their privileged status. In addition, I am committed to actively support those in my community who are more vulnerable than I am. We can influence the system through our words and our actions. Even small acts in daily life can be helpful. As we move through our worlds, we can be more aware of those who might need a little bit more of our care to feel truly safe and truly welcome in a social situation. Some call this “reverse racism or sexism”; I call it “taking care of life”.

Having been raised in a socially liberal household where the valuing of all human beings was encouraged, I never saw the more subtle and nefarious ways that systemic oppression and white, male privilege supported me and “my kind”. I always saw myself as one of the “good-guys”, on the side of the fair and good. Still, the social ground on which I walked and the social air I breathed gave me privileges that were more pervasive than I had realized. I am very grateful to my daughter whose life and occupational passions have brought these issues more into foreground for me and now, hopefully, for you.

I would be delighted to hear your responses, whether you agree, disagree or simply want to take these issues further. The *Embodied Life*<sup>™</sup> School, through this forum, will seek to further this exploration.