

Privilege

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The idea of privilege began to really and finally work its way into my thick head several years ago when I started to see, up close and personal, the doorways through which I was allowed to walk and others were not.

Before we go any further, we need a working definition of privilege. The preferred source, at least by me, is the Oxford English Dictionary. Privilege is defined this way: A special right or advantage for a particular person or group; the rights and advantages of rich and powerful people.

And taken one step further, people of privilege are the ones who decide what the laws will be – for example, who is allowed to marry whom, or who gets benefits, who goes to jail and who doesn't, who gets to vote, who gets to drink out of certain fountains. People of privilege and in possession of power generally like to keep it that way, which leads to the inevitable oppression of others, usually minorities.

Many of us in this congregation witnessed, as a collective, the privileges we enjoy when we volunteered at the Out of the Cold program in late January. And throughout the course of our days, we have opportunities to observe many examples of privilege, and its evil cousin, a sense of entitlement.

Many people throughout history have been quoted about the subject of privilege.

- Joseph Campbell said “The privilege of a lifetime is being

who you are.”

- Charles Evans Hughes, an American jurist and statesman, said “When we lose the right to be different, we lose the privilege to be free.”
- George Bernard Shaw said: “I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”
- And my favourite quote, by William Faulkner: “A mule will labour 10 years willingly and patiently for you, for the privilege of kicking you once.”

Michael S. Kimmel, author of *Privilege*, describes the power of privilege not as a doorway but as a wind. This is what he says:

“To walk into a strong head wind is to understand the power of nature. You set your jaw in a squared grimace, your eyes are slits against the wind, and you breathe with a fierce determination. And still you make so little progress.

“To walk or run with the same wind *at your back* is to float,” said Kimmel “to sail effortlessly, expending virtually no energy. You do not feel the wind, it feels you. You do not feel how it pushes you along, you feel only the effortlessness of your movements. You feel like you could go on forever. Only when you turn around and face that wind do you realize its strength.

Kimmel added: “Being white, or male, or heterosexual in the United States (and might I add Canada) is like running with the wind at your back. It feels like just like plain running, and we rarely, if ever, get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported, and even propelled by that wind.”

A two-week construction expedition to Honduras in 2002 with my daughter was one of those events that helped to further open my eyes to privilege, an awareness that had been slumbering for years,

overtaken by the busy-ness of life.

Another whack upside the head occurred several years ago when our son emerged from his closet and began our shared journey with the words: “Mom, there’s something I have to tell you.”

In an attempt to better support my son and to understand the challenges facing the sexual- and gender-diverse community, I was struck, again, by how extraordinarily privileged I am.

I am soaked in privilege, marinating in it. From the moment my eyes pop open in the morning to the moment my head hits the pillow in the evening, I enjoy a level of privilege and power experienced by very few people in the world. And how did I obtain this elite and powerful place in society? How did I find myself having the power to exclude or admit, to oppress or support? Well, I certainly didn’t work for it. I merely hit the jackpot at birth — white, straight, Canadian of European-descent, non-transgender, no visible or invisible disabilities to speak of, and human.

And let’s not forget the year I was born – 1954 – which places me squarely in the Baby Boom generation – a period running from about 1943 to 1960, depending upon whom you talk. The sheer numbers of my generation — I’ve seen it colourfully described as the “pig in the python” — make it arguably the most privileged and powerful demographic on the planet.

These birth circumstances have led to incredible privileges. They have given me access to a good education, solid employment, economic stability, health access without hassle and others too numerous to mention. A full sermon could probably be written about each of my birth advantages.

Adding to my list is the fact that I was raised in the predominant religion of Christianity. I attended a Presbyterian church, taught

Sunday school, and sang in the choir. My dad and aunt were elders. The church drew its members from the surrounding countryside, and you would have been hard-pressed to find anyone who was not a Protestant. So homogenous was this culture that even Roman Catholics were considered outside the mainstream, let alone people of completely different religions. As a Unitarian, I now find myself in a minority. I am sometimes regarded with some suspicion and even fear. How many of us have been told we are not involved in a “real religion”? I remember reading many years ago, with some astonishment, that the Pope at the time considered Unitarian-Universalists to be one of the top 10 threats to Christianity.

John Shelby Spong, a name many of us know, talks about his relationship of privilege with the Bible in his book *The Sins of Scripture*. For those of you who don't know the name, Spong is a [liberal Christian theologian](#), biblical scholar, religion commentator and author, and calls for a fundamental rethinking of Christian belief, thus ticking off a large number of theologians and “important Christian people”, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Go big or go home, I guess.

Spong writes: “Because I loved this book (the Bible) so much and because I read it so carefully, I could not fail to notice its gory passages did not jibe with what I had been told about either God or religion. I met in its pages things that were disturbing, malevolent and evil. That was how the dark side of the Bible first began to dawn on my consciousness.”

He continues: “Looking back, I believe now that these insights would have come to me even sooner had I not been what the Bible seems to regard as a privileged person. I do not refer to my social or economic status, which was modest to say the least, but to the fact that I was white, male, heterosexual and Christian. The Bible affirmed, or so I was taught, the value in each of these privileged

destinations. It was clearly preferable to be white than to be a person of colour; male, in whom the image of God was clear, rather than female; heterosexual and therefore “normal”, rather than homosexual and therefore “abnormal”; and Christian, which was, of course, the only true religion. I grew up secure in each of these definitions.”

So I'd like to return again to my jackpot list of birth privileges, to turn around and assess the strength of the wind that pushes me along my life's path.

I'm going to start with the one thing that I am not – male.

As a little girl growing up on a farm in Niagara, I and my female relatives believed we would never see the words “and daughters” coupled with the family name on the main barn. Leaving the farm, and starting life as career woman, I was initially denied benefits because my husband “had them for me,” my salary was lower than my co-workers (a 19 per cent raise by a more progressive boss changed that) and I was admonished on more than one occasion for being selfish because I was taking away a man's job. I can guarantee that most women sitting in this congregation today can tell similar stories, such as trying to get a loan without a husband's signature.

The UN's Gender Progress Report of 2008 indicates that the inequitable treatment of women is holding back the health and prosperity of our planet. The report found that fewer women than men have a secure paid job; that insufficient aid is going to gender-equality programs; that universal access to reproductive health is fundamental to empowering women; that gender equality and women's empowerment are unattainable without education. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the world's 130 million children who are out of school are girls because they are too busy fetching water, working in fields, lack separate toilet facilities or are sexually

exploited.

I've also had several interesting conversations with transgender men who observe that since transitioning, they have experienced many more privileges, including being taken more seriously, than when they presented as women.

My challenges living as a woman have been offset by my other birth circumstances, that of being white, straight, Canadian of European descent, and so on.

Feminist and stage actress Betty Buckley made a similar observation when she said: "I have never experienced racism in the feminist movement, so it concerned me to think that I was unable to see the subject clearly because I came from white, middle-class privilege."

Another huge advantage from my birth is that I was born human. Our species has an abysmal record of ignoring or trampling the rights of sentient creatures in the oceans, on land or in the heavens. We think nothing of destroying habitats to retrieve natural resources, of eating animals raised in cruel factory farms, of willingly purchasing family companions from puppy mills, turning a blind eye to the treatment of lab animals, or using and abusing them for our entertainment.

Because I come from the dominant life form, I am in a position to oppress. You and I and other Unitarians affirm and promote a respect for the interdependent web of all existence and I know that there are people in this congregation who actively fight for the rights of animals.

As well, I am a Canadian of European descent. A friend recently told me that Canadians are in the top three per cent of people in the world because of the lifestyle advantages we enjoy, usually defined

by markers such as the environment, education, social policies and so on. While I haven't been able to confirm that figure, it would not surprise me in the least if it were true.

My European heritage is closely linked to another birth-spawned privilege, the white colour of my skin. As much as we like to think that racism is a thing of the past, those winds of privilege still blow hard at the backs of white people.

In August 2006, the *Globe and Mail* printed the story of one man who sent out two sets of identical resumes, one with his traditional Indian name, one with a white-sounding name. Of the five companies he sent them to, three companies responded to Roger, not one to Rajiv, even though the listed qualifications were exactly the same.

Research from the Cambridge-based National Bureau of Economic Research in the U.S. suggests a black-sounding name remains an impediment to getting a job. After responding to 1,300 classified ads with fake resumes, the authors found black-sounding names were 50 per cent less likely to get a callback than white-sounding names with comparable resumes.

Robert Jensen, a white journalism professor at the University of Texas in Austin, talks about an encounter he had with a very bright and very conservative white student about affirmative action in college admissions. The student opposed affirmative action, and Jensen supported it.

The student said he wanted a level playing field with no unearned advantages for anyone. The professor asked him whether he thought that in the United States being white has advantages. Yes, the student conceded, there is something real and tangible that could be called white privilege.

So, if we live in a world of white privilege, unearned white privilege, Jensen said, how does that affect the notion of a level playing field?

The student paused for a moment and said, "That really doesn't matter."

And that statement, said the professor, revealed the ultimate white privilege: the privilege to acknowledge one has unearned advantages but (to) ignore what it means.

I was struck, a few years ago, how white privilege played out in the media in a case involving an abduction of two boys, one white and the other First Nations, by pedophile Peter Whitmore. After the standoff with police ended, one of the St. Catharines radio stations reported, in this sequence, that (one), the 10-year-old had escaped and was safe, that (two) Whitmore had given himself up and was safe, and (three) that the First Nations boy was safe. In other words, the First Nations boy's safety was not considered as newsworthy as even the pedophile's surrender.

So, let's move on to another set of birth circumstances that have led to my impressive list of privileges: I am heterosexual and non-transgender.

A huge bonus I have as a human being is that my internal sense of womanhood matches my body. A woman is reflected in my mirror, and I'm OK with that. My transgender friends do not share the same experience.

Unlike my transgender acquaintances, I have no difficulty checking off an M or an F on my official documents. I am not considered mentally ill because of the way I identify; I don't have to worry about being beaten up in a washroom or whether I'll be denied membership to the local gym. I'm not routinely asked how I

have sex or what my genitals look like, and I'm not at risk of losing family, friends, my job or my home because of how I identify.

The transgender movement is generally considered to be 15 or 20 years behind the gay rights movement, but even in North America, there is a long way to go before equality is achieved.

- On Nov. 4, 2008, when the United States elected its first African-American president, some states on that same day stripped away the rights of gays and lesbians to marry or adopt children.
- Last fall, two lesbian women from Oshawa were brutally punched in their faces by a straight white man as they all waited to pick up their children in the schoolyard.
- A doctor in a Winnipeg clinic, who received her medical training in Egypt, advised two women to look elsewhere because she was uncomfortable with their lesbian relationship.
- I have personally observed people make a wide berth around Pride display tables for fear that they may be identified or perceived as gay.
- How many of us have heard the words “that’s so gay” dropped dismissively and in a demeaning manner into a conversation? More recently, the use of the word “pansification” as applied to hockey players in the NHL, caused a firestorm.
- And then there are the hate crimes. In the United States, the FBI reported that in 2007, there was a one per cent drop in overall hate crimes than in 2006, a good thing. The decline was driven by decreases in the two largest categories — crimes involving race and religion. However, the third-largest category, sexual orientation, showed a six-per cent *increase* in reported hate crimes.

Let's move on to another set of privilege-granting circumstances of birth; I have no visible or invisible disabilities of which to speak.

Every person in this congregation is only temporarily able-bodied. At some point in our lives, our bodies breakdown, either for a short period of time or permanently, and we will require assistance. There maybe issues with hearing, speaking, seeing, mobility, dexterity, learning, developmental delay or disorder, psychological or chronic conditions. And if we become persons with disabilities, we may find that our guide dogs are refused in restaurants or public transit, that washrooms are inaccessible to our wheelchairs or walkers, that door handles are impossible to turn, that street curbs hinder or stop our passage. If you are a young woman with a disability, you are statistically at four times the risk of assault than the general population.

As a person with temporary disabilities last summer, my dignity was checked at the door. My walker was too big to go into the clothes closet, I needed help with the most fundamental human activities, pain medication kept me in a fog, and my world was restricted to a few rooms in my house. Ironically, my knee replacement surgery occurred at the same time as the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, so I was able to watch the world's most athletic and able-bodied individuals do their thing while I mourned my fleeting loss of independence.

But as many of my friends with disabilities tell me, the biggest hurdle is attitudinal, one of prejudice or ambivalence. Again, I go back to the Olympics. Were the Paralympic Games covered with the same enthusiasm as the Olympic Games? Were our Paralympic athletes celebrated with the same intensity?

Of course, human beings are complex individuals, and for many of us, we face layer upon layer of discrimination because we don't

have the privileges afforded by our birth circumstances. A person might be disabled *and* a person of colour. Or a gay atheist. Or any number of ways in which people discriminate and push “the other” to the margins.

So how do we use our privileges and power to better the world instead of to oppress?

First, I think that we have to stop feeling guilty about our privileges. We have them. Period. They were a part of the package when we were born.

We must also realize that we have limitations — even if we use the power generated by our privileges, we can’t do everything for everyone. We must choose our battles with care. I’m sure we all know people who have taken on far too much, because they are passionate about what they do, and then burn out.

The next step is to decide how we each as individuals, or perhaps as a collective, want to use the power of our privileges. Do we want to ensure that children, especially girls in developing countries, have opportunities for education? Do we, as the dominant life form on this planet, become more strident in fighting for animal rights? Do we become allies in the Pride community and show our support by attending the raising of the rainbow flag at city hall or marching in the Toronto Pride Parade? The causes that matter to us, that stoke our passions and nurture our spirits, are as diverse as we are as individuals.

And guiding us in our actions are our Unitarian principles. It is a wonderful thing when privilege and principals merge to create potent and lasting results. We cannot fail to be inspired by principles like promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, or striving for justice, equity and compassion in human relations, or working toward goals of peace and liberty.

Sometimes we can find inspiration in the actions of others.

Take the Day of Pink, which some of us recognized by wearing a pink-coloured article of clothing on Feb. 19. I know that many of you have heard this story before, but it bears repeating. The Day of Pink was born when two students at an East Coast high school watched a Grade 9 boy being bullied and called a faggot because he had worn a pink T-shirt to school. The two seniors, recognizing homophobia when they saw it, wore pink to school the next day. Pretty soon, the whole school, and then the province, was wearing pink. The movement spread into the northeastern United States. It was a simple, elegant grassroots solution with a powerful outcome, and all because two high school seniors recognized their privileges and tried to help someone else.

And as I mentioned during joys and concerns last week, Adam, a Niagara College nursing student, was recently stunned to open an envelope and find \$125 from his classmates. The students, many of them shouldering student loans or raising young families, recognized their privileges and raised the money so that Adam, the nursing student and a young transgender man, could afford to have his name legally changed. It was a gift of love and respect.

And what did those young people do that was so extraordinary? In both cases, they simply turned around and experienced the wind in their faces, the same wind that had been blowing at their backs, the wind of privilege and advantages.

In no way do I want to suggest that everything we ever accomplish is attributable solely to privilege. Hard diligent work, sound decisions, a certain amount of risk taking and many other factors—they all have a role in how our lives play out. We all know the story of the young man whose black absentee father herded goats in Kenya, was raised by his grandparents in Hawaii, studied hard,

never strayed from what was important to him, and despite all odds is now the first African-American president of the United States. Barack Obama, who felt the sting of discrimination because of the colour of his skin, had few of the privileges many of us sitting in this space enjoy, and yet, he now holds one of the most powerful political positions in the world. His presidential predecessor, on the other hand, squandered his constellation of privileges and left the world a troubled legacy that will take years, if not generations, to overcome.

There is no dramatic conclusion to this presentation. No finger wagging. No scolding. We alone decide what our privileges are, if any, and how we will use them. We all have lived experiences that govern us. For me, it has been a helpful and grounding exercise to periodically ask myself these questions: Did a breeze, or a gale of privilege help to push me along this path? Were my achievements gained at the expense of someone or something else? I believe that once we recognize our privileges, we can then thoughtfully and purposefully work alongside those are left behind. And as Unitarians, we will do so with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.

Thank you.