

Lisa Malton

Dear Members of the Council,

I want to apologize to each of you for my behavior at the last council meeting. I am sorry for saying that I have lost respect for the council, and for painting with the broadest of brushes when characterizing each of you as having been involved with this process. I do not have evidence of how this thing has unfolded. Further, I know not every member of the council has been involved with the process, and those who were involved were likely trying to do their best given what they knew and when they knew it. We all want peace and unity. Keeping the peace and fostering unity feels different depending upon your vantage point.


Plain and simple, I was angry and ashamed. The atrocities committed against people of color whether native, enslaved, or immigrant, sickens and saddens me. I carry the guilt of having descended from the white power structure that at a minimum allowed it to happen and benefited from that structure. I have been this way always and I do not apologize for these values. My temper got the best of me and I did a disservice to all in the room.

Why do I continue to carry this guilt? Because there has ~~been~~ ^{been a clean} no break with that foul and evil past. Indeed, I along with every white person in this room continues to benefit from it. My white guilt is inextricably tied to my white privilege which has been my constant companion for 56 years. If you question whether you enjoy this same privilege, take yourself/your life just as it is and ask yourself how different it would be and in what ways, if you changed only the

factor of your whiteness. That white guilt is not prevalent for those who ~~have~~ do not accept ~~ed~~ white privilege is not surprising. There is no reason to take responsibility and to find solutions to problems you do not acknowledge. There is no reason to acquiesce to interests other than those that have previously benefitted you if you do not believe an imbalance of privilege and power besets us all. I believe this is a moment in Jonesboro's history when ~~not~~ the white people need to yield decisionmaking to our African American neighbors since they do not have any of their history/heritage represented in a visible way in ~~the~~ their ~~own~~ community. Rather they drive down the streets of avowed racists, slaveholders, and those who supported the continued practice of lynching.

Excerpt from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really>

What is white privilege?

1. White privilege is *not* the suggestion that white people have never struggled.
2.  Many white people do not enjoy the privileges that come with relative affluence, such as food security. Or access to goods and services, such as nearby hospitals.
3. And white privilege is *not* the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned; most white people who have reached a high level of success worked extremely hard to get there.
4. Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort.

Francis E. Kendall, author of *Diversity in the Classroom and Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*, [comes close](#) to giving us an encompassing definition: “having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do.”

It was only after discrimination persisted for years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that white privilege came to be viewed as being more psychological—a subconscious prejudice perpetuated by white people’s lack of awareness that they held this power. White privilege could be found in day-to-day transactions and in white people’s ability to move through the professional and personal worlds with relative ease.

But some people of color continued to insist that an element of white privilege included the aftereffects of conscious choices. For example, if white business leaders didn’t hire many people of color, white people had more economic opportunities. Having the ability to maintain that power dynamic, in itself, was a white privilege, and it endures. Legislative bodies, corporate leaders and educators are still disproportionately white and often make conscious choices (laws, hiring practices, discipline procedures) that keep this cycle on repeat.

The more complicated truth: White privilege is both unconsciously enjoyed and consciously perpetuated. It is both on the surface and deeply embedded into American life. It is a weightless knapsack—and a weapon.

It depends on who’s carrying it.

White Privilege as the "Power of Normal"

individuality aside

Sometimes the examples used to make white privilege visible to those who have it are also the examples least damaging to people who lack it. But that does not mean these examples do not matter or that they do no damage at all. These often-used examples include:

- The first-aid kit having "flesh-colored" Band-Aids that only match the skin tone of white people.
- The products white people need for their hair being in the aisle labeled "hair care" rather than in a smaller, separate section of "ethnic hair products."
- The grocery store stocking a variety of food options that reflect the cultural traditions of most white people.

But the root of these problems is often ignored. These types of examples can be dismissed by white people who might say, "My hair is curly and requires special product," or "My family is from Poland, and it's hard to find traditional Polish food at the grocery store."

~~This may be true.~~ But the reason even these simple white privileges need to be recognized is that the damage goes beyond the inconvenience of shopping for goods and services. These privileges are symbolic of what we might call "**the power of normal.**" If public spaces and goods seem catered to one race and segregate the needs of people of other races into special sections, that indicates something beneath the surface.

White people become more likely to move through the world with an expectation that their needs be readily met. People of color move through the world knowing their needs are on the margins. Recognizing this means recognizing where gaps exist.

White Privilege as the "Power of the Benefit of the Doubt". The "power of normal" goes beyond the local ^{Walmart} ~~shops~~. White people are also more likely to see positive portrayals of people who look like them on the news, on TV shows and in movies. They are more likely to be treated as individuals, rather than as representatives of (or exceptions to) a stereotyped racial identity.

In other words, they are more often humanized and granted the benefit of the doubt. They are more likely to receive compassion, to be granted individual potential, to survive mistakes.

This has negative effects for people of color, who, without this privilege, face the consequences of racial profiling, stereotypes and lack of compassion for their struggles.

In these scenarios, white privilege includes the facts that:

- White people are less likely to be followed, interrogated or searched by law enforcement because they look “suspicious.”
- White people’s skin tone will not be a reason people hesitate to trust their credit or financial responsibility.
- If white people are accused of a crime, they are less likely to be presumed guilty, less likely to be sentenced to death and more likely to be portrayed in a fair, nuanced manner by media outlets (see the [#IfTheyGunnedMeDown](#) campaign).
- The personal faults or missteps of white people will likely not be used to later deny opportunities or compassion to people who share their racial identity.

This privilege is invisible to many white people because it seems reasonable that a person should be extended compassion as they move through the world. It seems logical that a person should have the chance to prove themselves individually before they are judged. It’s supposedly an American ideal.

But it’s a privilege often not granted to people of color—with dire consequences.

For example, programs like New York City’s now-abandoned “Stop and Frisk” policy target [a disproportionate number](#) of black and Latinx people. People of color are more likely to be arrested for drug offenses despite using [at a similar rate](#) to white people. Some people do not survive these stereotypes. In 2017, people of color who were unarmed and not attacking anyone [were more likely](#) to be killed by police.

Those who survive instances of racial profiling—be they subtle or violent—do not escape unaffected. They often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and [this trauma](#) in turn affects their friends, families and immediate communities, who are exposed to their own vulnerability as a result.

A [study](#) conducted in Australia (which has its own hard history of subjugating black and Indigenous people) perfectly illustrates how white privilege can manifest in day-to-day interactions—daily reminders that one is not worthy of the same benefit of the doubt given to another. In the experiment, people of different racial and ethnic identities tried to board public buses, telling the driver they didn't have enough money to pay for the ride. Researchers documented more than 1,500 attempts. The results: 72 percent of white people were allowed to stay on the bus. Only 36 percent of black people were extended the same kindness.

Just as people of color did nothing to deserve this unequal treatment, white people did not “earn” disproportionate access to compassion and fairness. They receive it as the byproduct of systemic racism and bias.

And even if they are not aware of it in their daily lives as they walk along the streets, this privilege is the result of conscious choices made long ago and choices still being made today.

White Privilege as the “Power of Accumulated Power”

Perhaps the most important lesson about white privilege is the one that's taught the least.

The “power of normal” and the “power of the benefit of the doubt” are not just subconscious byproducts of past discrimination. They are the purposeful results of racism—an [ouroboros](#) ^{a row ~~bow~~ bow ros} of sorts—that allow for the constant re-creation of inequality.

These powers would not exist if systemic racism hadn't come first. And systemic racism cannot endure unless those powers still hold sway.

*constantly recurring
cyclical process*

You can imagine it as something of a whiteness water cycle, wherein racism is the rain. That rain populates the earth, giving some areas more access to life and resources than others. The evaporation is white privilege—an invisible phenomenon that is both a result of the rain and the reason it keeps going.

McIntosh [asked herself an important question](#) that inspired her famous essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”: “On a daily basis, what do I have that I didn’t earn?” Our work should include asking the two looming follow-up questions: *Who built that system? Who keeps it going?*

The answers to those questions could fill several books. But they produce examples of white privilege that you won’t find in many broad explainer pieces.

For example, the ability to accumulate wealth has long been a white privilege—a privilege created by overt, systemic racism in both the public and private sectors. In 2014, the Pew Research Center released [a report](#) that revealed the median net worth of a white household was \$141,900; for black and Hispanic households, that dropped to \$11,000 and \$13,700, respectively. The gap is huge, and the great “equalizers” don’t narrow it. [Research](#) from Brandeis University and Demos found that the racial wealth gap is not closed when people of color attend college (the median white person who went to college has 7.2 times more wealth than the median black person who went to college, and 3.9 times more than the median Latino person who went to college). Nor do they close the gap when they work full time, or when they spend less and save more.

The gap, ~~instead~~, relies largely on inheritance—wealth passed from one generation to the next. And that wealth often comes in the form of inherited homes with value. When white families are able to accumulate wealth because of their earning power or home value, they are more likely to support their children into early adulthood, helping with expenses such as college education, first cars and first homes. The cycle continues.

This is a privilege denied to many families of color, a denial that started with the work of public leaders and property managers. After World War II, when the G.I. Bill provided white veterans with “a magic carpet to the middle class,” racist zoning laws segregated towns and cities with sizeable populations of people of color, ~~from Baltimore to Birmingham, from New York to St. Louis, from Louisville to Oklahoma City, to Chicago, to Austin, and in cities beyond and in~~ between.

These exclusionary zoning practices evolved from city ordinances to [redlining by the Federal Housing Administration](#) (which wouldn't back loans to black people or those who lived close to black people), to more insidious techniques written into building codes. The result: People of color weren't allowed to raise their children and invest their money in neighborhoods with “high home values.” The cycle continues today. Before the 2008 crash, people of color were disproportionately targeted for subprime mortgages. And neighborhood diversity continues to correlate with low property values across the United States. [According to the Century Foundation](#), one-fourth of black Americans living in poverty live in high-poverty neighborhoods; only 1 in 13 impoverished white Americans lives in a high-poverty neighborhood.

The inequities compound. To this day, [more than 80 percent](#) of poor black students attend a high-poverty school, where [suspension rates are often higher](#) and resources often more limited. Once out of school, obstacles remain. Economic forgiveness and trust still has racial divides. In a University of Wisconsin study, 17 percent of white job applicants with a criminal history got a call back from an employer; only five percent of black applicants with a criminal history got call backs. And [according to the National Bureau of Economic Research](#), black Americans are 105 percent more likely than white people to receive a high-cost mortgage, with Latino Americans 78 percent more likely. This is after controlling for variables such as credit score and debt-to-income ratios.

Why mention these issues in an article defining white privilege? Because the past and present context of wealth inequality serves as a perfect example of white privilege.

If privilege, from the Latin roots of the term, refers to laws that have an impact on individuals, then what is more effective than a history of laws that explicitly targeted racial minorities to keep them out of neighborhoods and deny them access to wealth and services?

If white privilege is “having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do,” then what is more exemplary than the access to wealth, the access to neighborhoods and the access to the power to segregate cities, deny loans and perpetuate these systems?

This example of white privilege also illustrates how systemic inequities trickle down to less harmful versions of white privilege. Wealth inequity contributes to the “power of the benefit of the doubt” every time a white person is given a lower mortgage rate than a person of color with the same credit credentials. Wealth inequity reinforces the “power of normal” every time businesses assume their most profitable consumer base is the white base and adjust their products accordingly.

And this example of white privilege serves an important purpose: It re-centers the power of conscious choices in the conversation about what white privilege is.

People can be ignorant about these inequities, of course. [According to the Pew Research Center](#), only 46 percent of white people say that they benefit “a great deal” or “a fair amount” from advantages that society does not offer to black people. But conscious choices *were* and *are* made to uphold these privileges. And this goes beyond loan officers and lawmakers. Multiple surveys have shown that many white people support the idea of racial equality but are less supportive of policies that could make it more possible, such as reparations, affirmative action or law enforcement reform.

In that way, white privilege is not just the power to find what you need in a convenience store or to move through the world without your race defining your interactions. It's not just the subconscious comfort of seeing a world that serves you as normal. It's also the power to remain silent in the face of racial inequity. It's the power to weigh the need for protest or confrontation against the discomfort or inconvenience of speaking up. It's getting to choose when and where you want to take a stand. It's knowing that you and your humanity are safe.

And what a privilege that is.

Collins is the senior writer for Teaching Tolerance.

How will you use yours?

Will you take off your knapsack,
open it up and ~~share~~ return
to our neighbors free and fair access
or will you club our neighbors
over the head with your knapsack?
in hopes they will not rise to
ask again?