

OUT OF PRIVILEGE



THE PODCAST

104 -- More than Just a Book Club Part 1 (transcription)

Welcome to the out of privilege podcast featuring Dr Byron Burkhalter, where we will talk about issues of racism, white privilege and the role they play in current affairs. Byron earned his doctorate in sociology from U. C. L. A and has been focused on issues of race bi-racial identity, whiteness and multiracial political coalitions in U. S. history for more than 30 years. He has taught at the university level, spoken at large public rallies and published numerous pieces on these issues. He takes an historical and sociological look at the systemic racism that the United States in particular is battling today.

I'm Genevieve Haldeman and I'll be your host. In today's episode, Out of Privilege, co-founders Wendy Apperson and Byron Burkhalter talk about helping individuals embrace and embark on a journey of self discovery on the path toward anti-racism. That starts with confronting personal complicity with white supremacy, head-on in what can be a very vulnerable and shameful experience. Take a listen and let us know your perspective in the comments.

Genevieve: There's been an explosion in the last few months of book clubs, in particular focusing on issues of race and white privilege. A lot of fantastic books that

have been out for the last couple of years to guide the white people who want to do this work. Really anybody who wants to do this work along the way, whether it's "Me and White Supremacy," "How to be an Anti-racist", "White Privilege," there's there's just a ton of books out there that that, uh, people have started to read and have started to come together for these book clubs. Um, what I find interesting is that certainly with George Floyd and everything that's happened in the last few months, there have been a, ah, large number of groups that have popped up in recent times.

But Wendy, you actually had an inkling of an idea more than two years ago that preceded this wave. What did you see then that drove you to create the Out of Privilege working groups that are the foundation of what Out of Privilege is today?

Wendy: So I wish I could say it was the police brutality that is apparent and obvious to me now. It wasn't, um, what I was seeing in that summer. I was living in LA that summer, and, um, I wasn't working and I was watching a lot of the news and there was mass shooting after mass shooting after mass shooting.

And I started reading the articles about the information they were gathering about the shooters after the fact and discovering there were two threads that seem to be popping out very frequently. Almost all of the shooters had a history of domestic violence, either towards a family member or romantic partner, and they also had a thread of white supremacy. Uh, in one form or another, there's manifestos or there's group involvement or there's postings on Facebook groups. And those threads hit me kind of hard. It kept hitting me in the gut that summer, and I remember talking with Byron about it quite frequently, but that was the first part, and I decided that the biggest problem was white supremacy and the only thing I could do about it was address it in myself.

That was, um, that was the only thing I had control over in that moment. And so the groups came out of a very selfish, um idea that I didn't want to do it alone. I wanted to take that journey with other people who also wanted to become more aware of their racism and find, um, a new way of looking at things, understanding that the hidden but also then being able to activate their anti-racism.

Genevieve: So I imagine not everyone is ready to do this kind of work. Especially, you know, two years ago, how did you get people to join you on this very personal and very vulnerable journey? Um and you know, what kind of response did you get when you talked to people? Did you have to ask a lot of people in order to get the first few to join? Or how did that work?

Wendy: I asked a lot of people repeatedly, and as it turns out, I'm older so I used my Facebook, um, profile and posted that I was interested in doing this work and that in itself was I think a pivotal point because that was the decision to be very public and visible about understanding that I had to do work.

But I wasn't gonna point fingers at other people and their racism, and their racist actions. I was going to, uh, work on myself first and invited other people to work on themselves first. And so, Yeah, you know, I don't have a million friends on Facebook, but I had a good handful and very few people. But a few awesome people stood up and they decided they wanted to take the journey with me.

Genevieve: And how did that journey start? What did you do when you first got the group together? And how do you create an environment where people can be vulnerable and safe at the same time?

Wendy: So there was something inherent in putting together people that I already knew. Some of them I knew better than others. Um, but we had that in common to start with. And I think, um, when we think about expanding Out of Privilege's work to, ah, groups of strangers or groups of people who work together those are different dynamics. But these people didn't know each other. Maybe, but they knew me. So we had that first step of building an intimate group.

Uh, the second part was taking an oath of confidentiality. What was said in the group - stayed in the group. Um and Then we were able to, um, take small steps to be vulnerable and share our past experiences. And to, um, bring transparency to the shame that's felt, the embarrassment that's felt when we realised that, um, some of our past actions and words have been incredibly hurtful to people of color.

Genevieve: Did you have a guide that you used or what was the guide that you used to get the group, um, to consciously look at what those behaviors might be? Because as we have heard and talked about, you know, this is, ah, system that is invisible to those that benefit. And so it can be very difficult to see the impact of your personal actions when you are when you go through life, recognizing them as invisible or not recognizing them at all. And so I'm curious what guides you used to help help frame that first group.

Wendy: Yeah, that's very true. They are incredibly invisible until they're obvious, and it required learning a new vocabulary. And we started out using, um, Layla Saad's, um I hope I'm pronouncing her name right. "Me and White Supremacy" she had just published a pdf online that came from a course that she ran in February of 2018 and

she ran it for 28 days of February. It was not a leap year. And, um, she had a daily prompt for each day. And she encouraged people to read about a particular form of micro aggression or, uh, a concept, and then journal on the prompt questions that are included in each day.

And so it was a pretty intensive, um, format that she was suggesting. We took it a little slower. Um, our group were busy and working jobs, and that was one of the things I wanted to respect and also felt it was pretty important to, um, allow people to go at a slower pace to digest and really integrate the information as we read it. Um, that's one of the things I've learned from some of the other personal growth work that I've done is that you can often learn about a concept, but if you don't sit with it for a while, you don't end up incorporating it into your daily life in your behavior, and so taking it over a longer period of time could be super beneficial, um, to making actual effective change. And the way you're seeing a situation in the way you're catching yourself in the moment, Um, you're a lot more successful.

Genevieve: And so you've been doing this work for a couple of years now, leading the group, but also personally going through your own journey. And while we're gonna talk to some of the other folks who've been on the group in a later podcast, I would love to hear any observations you've had about your journey. Particularly as you've brought other groups online as well. What have you learned?

Wendy: So I just want to clarify one thing. I'm not leading the group. I'm facilitating a space. It was really important that I, um I appear to be facilitating the space and participating just like everybody else in the group. Um uh, Byron joined this group and he became a leader of sorts, and then another of our Out of Privilege partners joined the group. She's an African American woman and mother, um, and she brought her perspective to the group as well. And that was an amazing gift that they both brought Byron, not just his background, but also his academic and teaching background and expertise in this area, Um, and teaching it to people. So we've been pretty lucky that we've had this level of understanding around us as we go on this journey.

Genevieve: Byron, talk about the role that you've played with this group. And you know, a lot of times the burden on black people comes from the white people who have jumped into discovering something and, you know, whatever black person they can find, they start asking these questions, which puts an added burden on them. But talk about, you know, the role that you play, that you wanted to play and how that works with the group.

Byron: I remember the first time I heard a black person say, “Hey, it's not up to me to explain to white people what's going on.” Um, that actually wasn't that long ago. For the first time I heard it and I thought, Wow, where were you maybe 30 years ago? Because part of this is, you know, I was teaching race and ethnicity in Los Angeles during the um Los Angeles uprising.

I taught for 20 years, often in places like Los Altos California or Santa Monica, California, where, you know, you were talking to a lot of not black, not brown people in trying to explain race. Um, I've also spent a lot of time. My wife has been in the tech industry. And so a lot of the people we've known in California are people who have almost no experience with black people whatsoever. And so I think it just the way I've gone through, uh, this world. I've had a lot of conversations talking with white people about race, and so it just feels like my life's work more than it feels like a burden.

I completely agree that if you haven't chosen to do this work, the fact that you would put you know that this burden would be put on you is definitely something to set a boundary on. But for me, this is kind of the work I chose. And then if I'm in the group, you know, if I'm calling in, um, you know, then I made the choice to be there. Uh, part of this is that I believe that there is a need to come together across racial identities across sexual orientations across gender identities across religious identities in order to create a better country and a better world.

And the only way to do that is with trust and the only way to trust um, liberal white people is for them to have some time looking at their own privilege first and starting to see perspectives outside of their normal. I want to be a part of that work. And honestly, I was a part of that work before I even knew it was work.

Genevieve: And so, as you've been joining these groups and having these discussions for the last couple of years, um, what surprised you about the groups themselves and in the process they were going through?

Byron: I think the way in which the groups over time become each other's people is what surprised me the most. So as this starts, I have a lot of white friends. My Facebook page didn't look that much different than Wendy's. Um, but there's, ah, a point where I don't trust them on race. I have had many conversations with Wendy over the years, and I'd had reasons to trust her, but there's a point at which I did not trust her about race. But then she went public with the groups, and somehow I got past that boundary. I started to believe in that. And as I watched that group grow, I watched people who were less and less able to accept forms of racism in their life, people who were more and

more able to take public stands, public actions and become anti-racist and in so doing, see each other within the group as a community, there was a belonging and a bond inside of those work groups, Um, that I wasn't really thinking about at the beginning, and I think that's been the biggest surprise.

Genevieve: When you teach in a classroom, you, you know will lecture for a while, give examples, but then you give assignments and you get the students talking to each other and you give them assignments to go and and discover something in the world. How is sort of teaching in that classroom environment similar, and different to working with these smaller groups?

Byron: I think, um, one of the things that is similar is that I have learned so much in classrooms from students. I've learned so much in these workgroups I have had to go through my own privilege.

You know, I have places to navigate here as well. Jamie who we referenced before who helped me see privilege that I had, uh and so I think that happens in classrooms too. I've had 18, 19, 20 year old students who taught me. There was a young man I'll never forget from Rwanda, who started explaining genocide in the classroom. And I'll never forget what he said. I had students from Iceland in Los Angeles that were the same ways. So I think that learning is one thing.

I think a second thing that is similar and you know, it's funny cause we talk about this as work in the groups and we talk about it as homework in my classroom, but it's about going and finding in your own life where these things exist. It's almost a treasure hunt. Um, I thought of it as collecting butterflies the way that you really come to understand what is going on is finding it outside of the group in your own life, in your own talk, in your own relationship with your friends, with your families seeing it like that is when you really know what it is. And I think those things are similar.

One of the differences about the group is that how the group morphs over time is always sort of up in the air. Um, what it will be six months down the road or year down the road if it will be at all for that long. And we've had groups now that have gone, um, two years, I think, um and you become friends and I still have some of my students who are my friends. But there's something quite interesting about the way that these groups connect us to each other.

Genevieve: It's a very personal journey, and I think you find a special bond with people who go down that path with you. And I think that's that may be part of of what that

experience is and the importance of going through it with the right group of people too where there is trust and, uh, the ability to hold each other accountable in a way because everybody's voluntarily going to these groups, they've all signed up to do it personally and that it can be tough to hold each other accountable in those situations. But I'm curious for either one of you. How do you hold each other accountable? How do you make sure that as people are going through this work that they're honest with themselves and the people around them?

Byron: So, um, it does depend. But there are these different styles. So my style is sometimes instead of confronting somebody directly, um, I will tell a story about, uh, United States in the 1780s. Or I will share some part of my own history that illustrates it. Um, we have somebody else in the group. Um, I don't know if I'm supposed to say names, you know, but, um who will sort of turn it into how he thinks about things as a way of not being confrontational at all?

Um, there's another person in the group who has this quiet way of probing through and saying things that are really holding you to account that are really just sharp, but said so gently, um, that they work out. Um, Wendy often times talks about other emotional journeys she's had to sort of illuminate the one that she's suggesting you see, in what just said. Different people have their styles and some of those styles work better in some instances than others. And maybe we've just been lucky. Uh, but usually somebody in the group finds somebody else in the group that they can hear particularly well. And then that just sort of goes that way.

Wendy: I think there's a lot to be said for the connection that builds as the trust builds and that trust comes from being vulnerable and opening up and then being able to have the permission to offer this feedback to the other people in the group. I wanted to... Byron made me remember something about the journey. Um, we, Genevieve, Byron and I have known each other a long time, 30 years. And to hear that there were things that he couldn't talk to me about because he knew that I had no understanding of that experience and how to hear it is hurtful.

That hurts that I wasn't there for him in that way. First So long. Now, these people are very important in my life, and that's I'm gonna have to live up to that for the rest of my life. But to understand that and understand that I hadn't been giving that to other important people in my life also is a really hard thing to wake up with. And so there's a bit of forgiveness that comes with that in doing the work and realizing that you can bring compassion and humility and, uh, higher awareness to the next conversation.

Um, but the journey's been about connection for me, and this has been in the way of connecting. So that's been key for me.

Byron: Yeah, you know, I might add one other thing to which is, um, I believe that I know that there are people that come at this in different ways. I believe that white people are going to be necessary to the political project, um, inherent in all of this, and I have met so many of them who have so little practice. These workshops, for most of them, have to be a place where they can make mistakes and not feel like they're going to be just slammed for them.

Now they have to be held to account, and they can't be let go, but they have to have enough of a sense that it's not in order to make them feel bad that they can, that they can go on. It's a delicate balance. You don't hit it every time. Um, there are times when things are too harsh. There were times when things were not harsh enough. But you're really just trying to allow them a place where they can walk out of that privilege into that connection, and that's the goal.

Genevieve: So let's expand on that a little bit, um, walking out of these vulnerable and safe spaces. What do you hope that they can do in the real world on a day to day basis? You know what is important for them to come through on the other side of this and be able to do?

Byron: So, I guess ultimately and I'm tempted not to answer this as vaguely as I'm going to answer it. I mean, eventually, the idea is that we need to be able to connect with each other and to be able to connect with each other, we have to have trust in each other. And for people who are not quite having that trust that straight white people will have your back and not just get tired and not just figure out how to connect with their family members who are targeting you. You know, trust could be a little hard to come by. In order to get to that trust. In order to get to that connection, you have to walk out of the privilege, um, that has you maintaining white supremacy. You have to walk out of what is really a false privilege and never was a good deal because of the people you had to give up And the things that kind of country that you're giving up by not having that connection.

Um, so that's sort of conceptually um, what it is. What it means, as a practical matter, is that sort of unspoken taken for granted normalcy that counts is whiteness where you live in segregated neighborhoods and went to segregated schools and have segregated Facebook pages. That has to change. You have to start to live with others and not continue that segregation. That's kind of the beginning of it.

Genevieve: So, Wendy, what is it? What is the outcome for you? What are you hoping? Not just that you get but that the people you've brought into this onto this journey with you will come out the other side of the journey lift.

Wendy: Mm. One of the hardest things that I've seen, the people who have joined this group. And now there's about two dozen people, um, who are doing different kinds of work within the group. One of the hardest things is to publicly, um, talk about it and whether that's with friends or family or with, um, just Facebook postings or Instagram postings, but to visibly witness their own racism, their own white supremacy and to be an example, um, the less blame, the less finger pointing, the better.

And so I hope that they're able to become comfortable enough having these conversations in the group that they can go outside the group and have those conversations. But what Byron was talking about with desegregating our own lives has been a topic of these groups since the beginning. Because we all live. We, I mean, the people in the group, um, and not all of us are white Caucasian people, um, in more affluent areas, we live with very few, um, integrations of race in our neighborhoods with black and brown people. And Byron, often asks, If we were going to go to one of those spaces. Would we even know exactly where to go? And so the next step after being able to have these conversations with people we care about to open up these paths of connection, is to make those steps into desegregating our life in some way. That's the workplaces that schools. If it's where you go out to eat when we're able to do that again, um, for me, it's going to be about where I live. So I think my hope, my hope, is that people start to think about how they can make those changes in their life.

Genevieve: So as there's been this explosion of, um, book clubs in discussions around race with everything that's been going on in the world, there's also been an equal amount of criticism around the dubious nature of, you know, entitled liberal white people having a book club. And is it enough? Is it actually gonna make any change? And it sounds, Wendy, from what you've said that the intent is this book club is gonna be the driver, uh, that opens up their minds to then go and make some of that change. But I'm curious what you say about the criticisms that you know, these entitled White Liberals are doing this to make themselves feel better.

Wendy: I think that could be a valid criticism. And this is a practice. What we're learning has to be a practice, and so it's gotta be today. And then we have to wake up and has to be tomorrow and the next day. And without that action without that evidence or receipts,

Um, I think the criticism is valid and you don't build trust unless you're able to have a preponderance of evidence if people can't look at your actions and see a change.

So reading the books is a very important first step. Understanding the concepts, gaining the vocabulary, being able to have those conversations in the group, and then outside of the group, those are important steps. And I don't think you can skip them. But if you stop there, um, things won't change in this country, in this world. And my hope is that we can influence enough people to, actually, um, practice this every day.

Genevieve: Byron, what's your take on that in terms of, you know, is reading a book enough. What else do people need to do?

Byron: Um, let me come at this from absolutely every different side, because I do think it's important. Um, I think what the books can do is they can give you a way to feel like you're OK in the same way that if you look at the murder of a man in Minneapolis and you say I'm against that, that's bad as a way of saying that you are one of the good people, right? But you still pay your taxes and those taxes still go towards policing of somebody wherever you are, right, then all you've done is sort of made yourself feel better.

I also want that criticism to be heard because I want pressure on people who are reading the books. I want them to be a little uncomfortable. I want them to think about whether or not this is enough. I think it's Ruth Wilson Gilmore that talks about the difference between the politics of style and the politics of life and death. And the books can be a style that keeps you out, keeps you distant from the fact that there are people on the streets of cities in this country today who are fighting for their lives, who have buried family members who are simply trying to exist.

And so there's no question, no question, it can be that. I've also had a group of people after an incident of my daughter's school racial incident. Ah, a bunch of parents came together and we're all talking maybe 15-20 of us. It's like, Well, what kind of group do we want to create to sort of combat this? This was like, Do we want to be an activist group? The witness is love for that. Do we want to pressure the administration? No, no, we don't do that. And then somebody said, How about a book club?

And then it was like, Oh, yeah, let's let's do that And so there's no doubt this could be a way of not doing anything. However, what we're talking about with the working groups is not just reading a book but examining your own life. You can do that with the book. You can do that with a group. You can do that in any number of ways. But The idea is to

situate yourself in the racial context from the beginning. That work is not a book club, and by the way, clubs like this have had quite a history.

There were book clubs in Russia prior to their revolution that did some pretty serious things as book clubs. They were banquets in France before the July monarchy and the revolutions of 1848 and they're just sitting around having dinner and drinks, and they overthrew a monarchy through that, these book clubs can sound innocuous because of that label book club. But that doesn't mean that there's not a revolution going on inside. So the question is not whether the book clubs, you know as a moniker is enough. Are you doing the work inside, or are you not doing the work inside? That's the question.

Genevieve: And so, for people who want to start this work, either start their own club or, um, do the work on their own. What advice do you have for them? And then also, what advice do you have for the black people throughout the world who are getting inundated with questions and requests from the random white person who happens to run across them. I mean, there's a meme on Facebook now, about the woman who talked to her, you know, washing machine repairman. And he was he, you know, took on that burden and spent a tremendous amount of time talking with her. And, you know, that's really changed his life. But, you know, he was kind of thrust into that, and may not you know, that may not be the gig for everybody. So what's your advice for non-black people who want to get started in this work and for black people who are being inundated

Byron: If I could take it backwards, Um, for the white people that are asking these questions of black people around them, please, please ask yourself, what are the black people getting out of it? You know, like, what is he getting? And maybe he is getting something out of it. You know, um, I would like him to be getting cash out of it. I would like him to be getting opportunity out of it. I would like him, his kids to have scholarships. Like, cause I know what you're getting out of it. You know, you're trying to figure things out. You're trying to feel better, not have your kids looking at you like "Wow, you know, that sort of non racial neutral position of yours doesn't look so good. Why are we in this neighborhood?"

Uh, I don't know what he's getting out of it, And so you have to think about what somebody else is getting out of it. And by the way, if they're on their job and it's a job where you can fire them, but they can't fire you, there's a power differential there. You have got to be aware of the power differential. Uh, when those things were happening

Now, allow me to contradict myself as gracefully as possible. I think these groups are a lot easier when there is a non white person in there that can bring a non white perspective.

So you may have a black friend who has spent their whole life accommodating you, and that's what they do. That perspective is not as helpful. It helps to have somebody in there, especially in the first few just sessions, who can sort of guide you to how you hide these things from yourselves. And I have met white people that can do that work without question. But it helps to have somebody like that in there.

The second thing is there are people who build themselves by taking other people down. You have to be very careful of such people in these groups. This could be very, um, damaging. And so, having said those things, let me just say one more thing. You have to remind yourself what this is about. You have to remind yourself why you're doing this. You have to think about the problems that black and brown people face in this country and think about the life and death of it, so that as you're looking at the things in your own life, you're making a connection ultimately to those things.

But it helps you keep in mind what's important, and it's not your pride, and it's not your ego. And it's not how you see yourself right. We're crushing people in this country right now. We're doing this work to take some of the weight off of them. That may help people maintain a perspective.

Genevieve: Wendy, for other people who are like you in the world and, uh, have the ambition, to help others make the changes that are necessary. What's your advice for them as they launch on this journey not just in their lives but helping others down that path as well.

Wendy: I think a few of, um I've been following a lot of black women on instagram who have been teaching me quite a bit. Almost all of them talk about the love that you need to approach any of this. And so the most important part is to bring love to this conversation with yourself. Um, there are a lot of resources. We've mentioned a couple. Um, our group has worked with several books, and I think, um, Byron's perspective has been an umbrella over all of it.

It's kind of guided, uh, how we digest all of that information. Um, but building a trusted container, a trusted space for you to have those conversations in and having a structure. I think the part of the work that's hard is finding the time to actually going inside yourself and addressing each of these concepts and how it applies to your life

experience and, um, finding the hidden parts, Byron mentioned this earlier, and It's shocking how you can be prompted to think about something and come up with nothing.

And then a couple months later, like, Oh, yeah, I did that or I said that or I had that experience or oh, wow, of course I forgot that because it was awful. I can't believe I did that or said that, um, giving yourself space to have that time with whatever of these resources that you want to use, um to do this work.

Genevieve: At the beginning of our discussion, you talked about the impact and the influence of shame. What do you say to people, whether those who are going through your group or those who are listening to how to deal with that sense of shame as they go through this work?

Wendy: I think it's an inevitable part of the work, and it's been an important part to work through so that I can continue the journey to continue to learn more. And the first step of this is to realize that no one is perfect, Um, and everything I learned about shame I learned from one of the most wise researchers about the subject Brene Brown, and she talks about shame, gremlins. And she says that and I'm paraphrasing, Forgive me. She says that the way to release the shame is to speak it.

And so, in the sharing of how you were racist, how it expressed itself, what, in whatever action or words in your past, that action actually releases the shame allowing yourself to be human and less than perfect. In that moment, I think the next step is about accountability, is about owning it and once were able to own what we've done. We can make the decisions to apologize, to be remorseful to the people that we hurt, and we can make plans for how to respond differently in the future.

And so I think about the shame gremlins of doing this work. And there have been many, um, but once you talk about them, they're not running around inside you anymore. They're released. And so the group helps with that process.

Byron: And I think that's a really interesting sort of twist on this, right, because uh huh, you know, often we have to kind of explain why somebody would give up privilege, and that word is a bit of a misnomer. in just the way Wendy described right, because out of privilege is out of shame, this is not just a racial discussion.

There's a convergence of people who have been talking about very similar things using somewhat different language. But Dr. Brown's language is not far away from language

we're talking about here. There's a reason to step out of shame. There's a reason to step out of privilege. There is something better on the other side.

Genevieve: Wendy Byron, I want to thank you both for the pioneering work that you have been doing and continue to do. And, uh, I'm excited about talking with some of the folks who have been going through the workgroups Wendy, that you set up and Byron that you've been talking with to get their perspectives on the experience on and what changes they have made along the way is a process that so Thank you very much.

Byron: Thank you.

Wendy: Thank you.

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