

OUT OF PRIVILEGE



THE PODCAST

105 -- More than Just a Book Club Part 2 (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 by 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 a 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-founder Wendy Apperson joins me in discussion with Lisa and Adam, two individuals who have embarked on a journey toward anti-racism. They share what drew them onto the path, what they've discovered and their advice for others starting the journey. Take a listen and let us know your perspective in the comments.

Genevieve: Today, Wendy and I are talking with Lisa and Adam about the work they've been doing to identify their white privilege and become anti-racist. You both have been participating in the working groups that Wendy has facilitated for some time. Adam, let's

start with you. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself? And what you What brought you to the group?

Adam: Sure, Genevieve. I came to this group. Well, it was right after the 2016 elections. That really started me on this venture. And, ah, after getting over the initial what the expletive deleted just happened. I felt that I was left with a lot of questions and I needed to seek answers.

That's when I started reading. I started with So you want to talk about race? Didn't find the easy answers that I was looking for, that I think a lot of people that start down this road are looking for. And so I came to the realization that they're not out there. It was right about that time that I got a message from Wendy inviting me to join the group. And I was all for it, all gung ho. But then, ah, realization hit me that I wasn't ready yet, and it took some time.

But eventually I got here, and I'm really, really glad to be here.

Genevieve: Lisa, what about you tell us a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the group?

Lisa: My first husband was African American, and I have a 30 year old child who is bi-racial from that marriage. And, you know, I witnessed some racism at that time. However, since we divorced and I am currently married to a Caucasian fellow, my white privilege has allowed me not to see the problems that have been going on over the years and since the event of social media.

I found that, um, you know, the police brutality, the murdering of unarmed African American men and women, the racism, including Donald Trump being elected. I found that it felt that things were worse than ever before. And I don't know if that's true or if my white privilege was allowing me not to see it, that it's been going on for the last 25 years. So in the last four years, obviously I wanted to do things to make the world better for my son. Wendy had talked about this group, and when I first looked at Leyla Saad's workbook, I thought, well, I don't have any racism.

I was definitely interested in diving into it and looking to see if there was anything there, and I found quite a few interesting aspects of it. And since then, obviously, we've been doing more work. We did that book first, and then we did another book. So it's been a journey, and the journey has shown me that my eyes were closed and that there's so much more work and so much more learning to be done.

Genevieve: It is, indeed. And I think for white people in general it is a very eye opening journey to be on and can be a very difficult journey. And so, Adam, jumping back to you, you said you weren't ready when it initially came up. Was there something that prompted you? Is there an experience or something else that brought you into the group?

Adam: Ah, actually, no. There isn't any specific experience in relationship in relation to racism. And actually, when I did end up joining the group, I still wasn't ready. But the group helped me learn how to be ready. It was simply an opportunity to reconnect with an old friend, Wendy. We went out to dinner and that this was right before the whole covid outbreak happened so relatively recently, and we spent some time during dinner talking about the group and her experiences and yeah lifted my motivations to the point where it convinced me that this is a thing that I need in my life.

Wendy: You both are amazing participants. You share openly, and you bring such interesting experience to the conversation and to everybody else's realizations in the group. So I was wondering, How did you come to trust the group? How did you come to feel safe? And maybe that's an assumption that you feel safe, but, um, in opening up like that, what built that space for you?

Lisa: I would have to say, because the group was small. I was already friends with Wendy. The only other people in there was Byron and Jamie, who are people of color, and Byron has a similar situation to mine where he's been in a multiracial marriage for many years and has bi-racial children, and also has the perspective of being African American and Jamie's African American. So I felt comfortable with them because I didn't I didn't think that they would, that they were there to help me, to learn about myself and Wendy I already felt comfortable with. So if it had been a bigger group, I'm not sure I would have felt what is comfortable.

Adam: It's a very similar experience for me and that I think Wendy is the common denominator for all of us since, ah, she was the one that was bringing together her friends into this group. So I didn't know anybody else. The first meeting that made me nervous, but at the same time, it made it almost easier to open up about certain things because these were mostly people that I had no prior relationship with.

So if I say something that could potentially harm ah, friendship well there isn't anything there to begin with, so I have nothing to lose beyond that, I kind of had an assumption. Knowing Wendy is a friend and the type of person that she chooses to surround herself

with I made the assumption that the people that she chose to bring into this group would be like minded, open minded, non-judgmental. We're all working on the same issues with self and with society. So we're all working on something that we can relate to and that all kind of comes back together to create an environment of trust.

And that is like, I guess you could call that the very definition of the safe space, and it made it very easy to be vulnerable. And I think that was really key to the success of this group in particular, at least for me.

Wendy: So did anything surprise you in particular about the journey?

Adam: So probably the biggest surprise for me is how prevalent racism is in our society and how it is hidden so effectively hidden in plain sight. It's there for you to see it, but only if you want to see it.

The biggest step to finding it is finding the racism within yourself and accepting that it's there and owning it. And once you can do that, then it's easy to see in yourself and in your surroundings. Yeah, well, once those eyes were opened, it's almost a forehead. Slappers like My goodness, why did I not see that before?

Lisa: I agree with Adam on that aspect. The thing that shocked me, I think, surprised me was that if you're born in America, you have grown up in a racist society that even though you don't think you're racist, no matter how integrated your neighborhood was when you grew up or what your situation is, you have racist tendencies.

At least I found that about myself. I think that that's probably true for everybody, because it's ingrained. It's ingrained into our banking institutions in our school and hidden history. There's just so many aspects of it that I didn't see before. I knew our history was tainted towards the Caucasian people. But I didn't realize how badly that you raced black history. I did not know that. And I think I've been exposed more than most Caucasian people, you know? So, um, it was really kind of surprising.

And as Adam said, you can't really point the finger to other people. You need to do this work. You have to start with yourself, and hopefully you can get people attracted to that rather than you know, saying you must do this, you know you can. They can see that you've changed and what you're doing that was my initial goal to was too, to see what? What was it that I could do or what was it that I could be part of to change what we've got going in our society today?

And there's so much. And this is just the tip of the iceberg learning about your own racist tendencies or racist. I'd ideas that you grew up with.

Genevieve: I think that is such a great observation, that I'm coming to the realization about as well as I've been going through this work is that it's hiding in plain sight, just like you said, Adam, Byron talks about white privilege is an invisible force. I'm curious. What would you say has stuck out to you the most that you are now able to see that Perhaps you weren't before?

Adam: Well, I'd like to start with an example of white privilege that I think relates directly to me and joining this group. I said that at the beginning when Wendy initially invited me that I kind of backed out that I just was ready, and over time I began to realize that that choice to not participate was a great example of white privilege. I had the luxury of not doing the work or waiting until I was ready to do the work. It wasn't a matter of life and death for me.

It was just a choice of when I felt ready to better myself. So, yeah, I had privilege, luxury of time. When we're talking about white privilege being an invisible force since joining the group and doing the work, I've been able to see it everywhere in every aspect of my life. And again, it's like I said before, it's there if you're willing to see it, but only if you're willing to see it. You start looking at everything from a racist context and for somebody who is thinking of but haven't began exploring their own racism, that can sound like a big burden going through life, thinking of everything in terms of race.

Well, it is. But at the same time, it's also liberating because you start to see things from, ah, whole new perspective.

Genevieve: Lisa, is there anything you want to add there?

Lisa: When I was married, I've told this story before. There was a time when we were in a grocery store we bought some groceries, and he had been playing volleyball and he sprained his shoulder. And so he had his arm in a sling and this is in Los Angeles and he had a leather jacket on over the slain because it was chilly.

It was nighttime and we went grocery shopping and we got in line and we paid for our groceries and we're walking out to the car and the security guard, and I guess the manager of the store came running out screaming at us. Stop, stop! You stole stuff! And, we're like, what? Why would we steal something? I hold up my grocery bags going. What are you talking about? Because I have never experienced this before. And

they made him take his jacket off and his sling off to show what was in his arm, which was nothing. That happened about 29 years ago, 28 years ago, and because of my white privilege, I've never had to deal with anything like that ever since.

As Adam said, it wasn't until social media showed us how many people were dying unarmed at the hands of police, that I realized that people don't have to warn their white Children, you know, Don't go jogging at night. Don't go bird watching. Don't call your cell phone out If the police officer pulls you over, you know this. These are the kinds of things, and that's just the obvious stuff. Then there's all the un obvious stuff that, as Byron says, that some invisible so many things.

Genevieve: Adam, you talk about not being ready. Why were you resistant or why did you not feel that you were ready? What has helped you stay on the journey even though you didn't feel like you were ready?

Adam: I wasn't ready because I was looking for and expecting the wrong thing. I was looking for an answer, one universal easy solution, and that simply doesn't exist. What it exists is the need to make some fundamental foundational changes in the way you see yourself in the way you see society. And that takes a heck of a commitment. It took some time after I slowly began to realize that for me to be able to get up the gumption to make that commitment.

As far as, what keeps me on that track? It's simple? It's the group, the perspectives, the stories, the different walks of life in their interpretations, the incredible insight from everybody, all the contributors, the amount that I learned about the history of the world, the present situation and of myself and the plates of others going through the same struggle. It's opened my mind by orders of magnitude, but it's also made me realize that we're just scratching the surface. So far, it's, Ah, it's a lifetime commitment. But thanks to the dynamic of the group and the relationships that I have established in the friendships that I've created with the people within the group it makes, it makes me look forward to each opportunity to make take the next step, in doing that work,

Genevieve: I think a strong community is helpful both from a support perspective as well as an accountability perspective. And, you know, having a trusted group that is their thio thio here you, but also to reflect for you is critical, it sounds like.

Adam: You struck a chord when you talked about the group maintaining accountability. We have one member of our group in particular, who unfortunately I've only been able to interact with in the group like three or four times, but she has a heck of a way of

keeping you accountable. Just ah, the simplest direct question in response to a statement that you just spent five minutes eloquating brings it all crashing down and makes you go. Wow. I saw that from completely the wrong perspective, and it's phenomenal.

Genevieve: I think that just emphasizes the importance of diversity not just within these groups, but in life in general, because we all bring different opinions and perspectives into any situation, and it's important to have all of those in day to day life. I think that's critical in that regard. That's really well stated, Adam. Lisa, were you at all hesitant to go on this journey and what keeps you on the journey?

Lisa: I wasn't hesitant to go on the journey. I think as I've been going on the journey, my eyes have opened more and more because I really didn't think I had any kind of racist tendencies. I did think I was classist, but come to find out that is racist, I learned a lot more too once we've finished with the workbook. We went into, uh, Ibram Kendi's book, and once I had done that, I wanted to go back to the workbook to look really look at those questions because I think that I got a better perspective off of some of the things from his book. The Thing that Keeps Me on the Journey what first of all, I feel like there's very few people that I know that really want to be introspective and really want to change the world and make it more equitable for everyone. That just been my experience. And so I kind of always felt like an outcast.

And since that book, when I find people like Wendy and like Adam, it feels like it's our tribe. And here's some people who are willing to work together and work to make the world a better place and more equitable for everyone. And that's that's what keeps me going. That and my son. Of course,

Genevieve: I actually want to tap into that just a minute. I mean, you were in this bi racial relationship. You have a bi racial son. Some might think you came with a specific perspective, and obviously you had experiences with your ex husband. How has this group, being part of this group, changed your perspective even more than the experiences that you had. And how has it changed the relationship with your son?

Lisa: It's given me more perspective to do more work and to be more anti-racist, as Kendi says that racism is an active adjective, Right? So you have to be anti-racist. You can't just be non racist. You have to be anti racist, and there's actually work involved in being an anti-racist. And so if I want the world to be a better place for my child, and I absolutely have to do more work than I have to get more people involved to do more work, how has it changed our relationship?

I don't think it really has changed our relationship. He loves the fact that I'm involved with it. Obviously, I'd love to bring his perspective to our group sometime. You know, he's very light skin so he can be white passing. But he has been attacked by skinheads as well and called racial slurs. He's experienced it just not as much as most people, I would imagine.

Genevieve: Being the mother of bi-racial children myself, there's an interesting dynamic because, like you said, they can be white passing. But I think that creates somewhat of an identity crisis for them as they go through that they don't naturally fit in any of the categories that the world assigns to them. Then it can be really challenging on both sides of that equation. It's ah, it's an important perspective to be able to understand.

Lisa: I agree. I asked him one time What? What do you check when you check the box? Because when he was born and I had to fill out his birth certificate, there was no box for black and white, you know that there was no mixed box and I think I checked both boxes. I can't remember, but I asked him what he checks, and he says, I sometimes I don't. I decline and sometimes I do both, but sometimes I do one of the other, he says. I just pick and choose.

Wendy: I'm curious. What would you tell someone about doing it about your experience?

Lisa: I think everybody needs to do this work, and I think that a zay said in the beginning that if you're Caucasian and you were born in the United States. You're gonna have racist tendencies whether you know it or not. And a lot of my women friends are, um, in bi-racial relationships and have bi racial children and many of them I have tried to invite to our group telling them that they need to look at these things and they have flat out said, Oh, I don't have that problem. So I am also looking for a better way to invite people to this group because I think the work needs to be done by everyone. So that's that's just my take on it.

Wendy: What would you share with someone who wanted to do the work was interested in starting? Is there anything that you would suggest to them that would be helpful to them as they started on their journey?

Adam: We keep referring to This is work. I think that that's an appropriate word. This is work. Ah, and that's something that I would tell them not as a warning, but more of ah understand that this is going to take some effort on your part.

It's not just a journey, but it's going to take some effort. But don't be afraid of that. The growth and the self awareness that you will achieve is incredibly rewarding and incredibly valuable. Along with that, you don't have to be able to do the work to join the group. The group will help you with that. You just simply have to be willing to start. And I think that's probably the most valuable aspect of the group is that it will guide you and it will give you the strength and the motivation that you may be lacking at the start.

Wendy: Yeah, I found that that commitment seems to be one of the most important ingredients in keeping someone engaged doing the work as we walked down the path because there's a little bit of homework, there's some preparation there, some thinking that happens. And then there's the meat of the discussion. We'll get to share our experiences and perspectives and also learn from each other and hold each other accountable. So I'm finding that that commitment and how to communicate that without it sounding like a huge burden. It's a is a tricky thing to do because it is work. It is an effort, and I guess the biggest opening is having that openness of mind to think about things in a slightly different way than you've been brought up to think about them so far. I'm wondering. I think Genevieve asked this question at least before, but I was wondering, Adam, has it changed any of your relationships along the way in these few months that you've been doing it as you learn more as you experience more as your perspectives change has it affected relationships in your life?

Adam: Yeah, it has affected some, some in a good way and some not so much. I've been able to have some really fantastic conversations with some of my white friends about race that I think brought us closer together, because we're discussing a topic that is very deep and very difficult, and we were able to do so in a very encouraging and productive way. On the flip side, there are some people that I attempted to have that conversation with, and it did not go at all well. The relationship suffered because of that, and it makes you kind of realize which friendships aired are stronger, which can survive a difficult situations and which ones fizzle out as soon as things start to get tough. It really makes you, Ah, take stock of of your relationships,

Genevieve: Adam, I I wanna ask, given your unique perspective on the world, what parallels there are, if any to your experiences as a gay man. And what are you learning about? The experiences of brown and black people?

Adam: Oh, man, that's a good question. My perspective as a gay man has, I think, made this process in one aspect easier, but also harder because as a victim of

oppression, I feel it's probably easier for me to understand and relates to the experiences of others who have been oppressed, at least to some level.

I certainly wouldn't equate the degree of oppression that I have experienced with those who are victims of systematic racism or even overt racism. But that mindset of a kindred spirit can be dangerous because it makes you think, Well, I'm the oppressed. So I couldn't possibly be the oppressor, cause that would be hypocritical. Well, guess what?

Genevieve: Indeed it is.

Adam: Yeah. So now, on top of having to deal with my own racism, I'm now faced with dealing with my own hypocrisy and take those two and sprinkle a healthy dose of white male fragility on top, and you can start to realize why we call this work.

But the gay community, the gay community, is a whole is very open and very accepting, but it doesn't exist in a vacuum. It has to function as part of the same society as everybody else does. And being a functional member of this society means you have to obey those society's rules. And those rules are laced with racism and sexism and chauvinism and, yes, homophobia. The gay community has a lot to work through. A swell just like everybody else.

Genevieve: Lisa, I want to go back to you and, uh, ask a question about your current husband, who you said is Caucasian. How does he feel about you doing this work? And is he also doing this work with you?

Lisa: It started off with just me and in Wendy's group, and he would hear our conversations of resume because he would be in the same room and he would hear Byron talking sometimes. And he saw, Wow, that's really great. I want to be a part of that and My husband is very much pro changing the world. He is out there working for various progressive candidates for political office, and he is always He's volunteering his time to be their media, to do their media for them.

And so anyway, So when it came along that I asked him if he would be interested and he said yes, he wanted to do it. So yes, he is now a part of our group, and I'm very proud of the fact that I'm married to a man who's who's just is interested in changing the world as I am makes me happy.

Genevieve: That's fantastic. It's It's great to be able to be on that journey together to and and to be able to share those experiences as you're going through it because it can

be challenging and very isolating. Um, Adama's you called out right? You could lose relationships over this, and if you're going through it with the person who's closest to you, I think that's particularly helpful.

Adam: I also I just have to give Lisa's husband props because he is the only straight white male in the group, so he has leaved to lose. Going through this work, but he is also one of the most passionate people in the group for doing this work. So I I think that he should get a special shout out for for being part of the group.

Genevieve: I'm curious as you all are now seeing what had before been invisible. How does that change what you do on a day to day basis as you go about like now you see it everywhere. What do you do differently in your life having gone through this because this is more than just a book club, right? This is not just about reading the books. It's about understanding your own behavior, your own personal dynamic and interactions. And so I'm just curious. Have there been any changes that you've made? Do you notice the doing things differently? Calling people out? Um, how has it changed? What you do?

Adam: I see everything through a different set of filters now being restricted because of covid means that that ah, daily social interaction has been limited. But I'm still seeing and thinking through a recognizing that I'm seeing things through my own racism and then trying to be conscientious of that and shifting that filter into trying to see it from an anti racist perspective, which I hate to admit. It's not always easy, but it's something that's, Ah, it's exercise for the mind and it's food for the soul if you're consistently making a conscious effort to see through that perspective.

Lisa: I was going to say it started this work with Wendy about a year and a half ago. So it was before covid and I remember some of the state's Byron had talked about that. The makeup of African Americans in our job or in our community because I grew up in an area that was very interracial when I was a child. And as I got older and went to college and then into my jobs and which is in the pharmaceutical industry, it made me really start looking for these things that had changed. Because the percentage of African Americans in these high paying jobs are in these communities are much smaller than the percentage of African Americans in the United States.

So it started making me be more aware of how my life has changed because my white privilege over the last 30 years and like start looking at those kinds of things and changing the way I behave, you know, making sure that there's more equity with people at work that are African American. However, with the covid, obviously, we're not doing

that right now, so it will be interesting to see what happens over the next year or two. And where we go from that you know, we've had quite a few things in the news this year that were sensational, and so we got a lot of people onboard.

How many of those people will drop off? How many will still continue to want to do the work? I obviously have another, you know, a more intimate reason to want to do it because of my child. And my husband obviously wants to do it, too. But how much more will people continue to do this if there's not another sensational murder in the news next year, or if we can get rid of Trump that kind of thing? So if things normalize which they've been sort of normalized for the last 20 years.

But there was still a lot of racism going on, and white privilege did not acknowledge that, and White fragility doesn't want to acknowledge it, so.

Genevieve: As Wendy said, it is significant and as Adam said had a lifelong commitment to changing the world, I mean, this is it starts with us each individually. But the expectation is that what we do within ourselves will have an impact on the way that we interact with other people, and that has a ripple effect. You know, the whole butterfly effect is there. Is there anything else you would want to say about the work in the groups, the benefit and how it's changed your perspective before we sign off?

Adam: I just wanted to kind of touch on some of the points that we've been making throughout this session that you can go about this work alone, but you are really just going to be scratching the surface of it. You can go about this in a book club, but you're not going to be getting the same benefit either.

I was speaking to somebody the other day who their book club there, the regular book club read Kendi's book How to be an anti Racist, and they discussed the book in, Ah, 2.5 hour recession. The whole book and I responded it. This was right after we had finished. I think maybe my second or third meeting when in the group when we were discussing the same book and said, Wow, we just spent 2.5 hours discussing a chapter, uh, and ran out of time before there was enough to be said so that the group brings perspectives, unique perspectives.

It can be a strong support network as you're dealing with some very difficult topics and learning some very difficult things about yourself. But most importantly, you're going to, through a sense of camaraderie, of dealing with these difficult topics. Create deep and meaningful friendships.

Genevieve: Lisa, Anything of any closing thoughts on your end?

Lisa: It creates love. It creates love. It creates knowledge, it creates energy. You know, you have this openness and this willingness to do this work, and you have like minded people who want to do this work.

And, you know, it may be difficult to get through, but it feels good. It feels good to make changes, and you have to start with yourself. You can't. You can't point the finger and other people. You have to start with yourself. That's all.

Wendy: Yeah, I was loving what you go through saying about how it's built, friendships and connections. And, um, I think that is the most important part of this work is being able to build those trusted connections with lots of other people, Have to understand part of their experience, Um, and be able to understand the hurtful experiences that came before before you can have those kinds of trusted and close connections, and that makes my heart warm. When I feel this community building and growing together, I sometimes use the word tribe, and I don't mean that in a pejorative way. I mean in a big bear hug, virtual way. But the love that everyone has brought to this group has encouraged everybody to keep going and to learn more and to work through the shame, gremlins and the difficult periods of learning a new concept. So I'm very grateful for you both, and I really appreciate you coming to talk with us today and share so openly and, um, with the audience, because that is, that's one of the ways that people start to open up and think about doing this work themselves. Um, thank you for sharing that with everybody.

Adam: You're very welcome, Wendy. And thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to come on and share my little bit of the story.

Lisa: I'd like to thank Wendy for starting this group and starting the journey because it's just been an amazing journey. And if she hadn't suggested it, I don't think I'd be on this with her.

Genevieve: Well, the three of you have definitely created a very open and trusting community that will work together for a long time and will come together on these difficult topics, and I think that's important. And it's not just co-location, right? Not everybody is in the same location, so I think it's especially now in the times of covid, it's important to recognize that you can build these types of communities in a virtual way and maintain them and have the trust and accountability that's required to be a part of that. And so thank you all for the open and honest work that you've been doing. Thank

you, Wendy, for bringing it to the table. I wish you guys the best of luck on your continued journeys.

Adam: Thank you, Geneveive.

Lisa: Thank you, Geneveive.

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