

## The Pea Underlying Privilege

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“Being White means never having to think about what it means to be White.”

- “Victor” in Lee Mun Wah’s award-winning documentary “Color of Fear”.

Simple statements are often more complex than they seem, and simple stories can be beacons, revealing truth through analogy. In the fable “The Princess and the Pea”, a princess is so sensitive to her environment that she can tell when a pea has been placed under the dozens of mattresses upon which she sleeps. Some may think this to be superhuman perception, but sensing and reacting to the world around us is very human, especially when our health and safety are at stake.

Individuals who are members of oppressed populations constantly feel the pea of prejudice, no matter how subtle. There are not enough mattresses in the world to shield them from feeling the discomfort of its evil. To those subjugated by society, prejudice is not a pea at all, but a boulder upon which they are forced to sleep.

But the pea of privilege is something different. It can only be felt by those individuals whom society wrongly claims are better, healthier, more attractive, more moral, more equipped, and saner than others. Unfortunately, it is a pea that often goes unnoticed.

Whites, males, Christians (particularly Protestants), heterosexuals, the physically able, the wealthy, the mentally fit, and the young, to name a few, hold the privilege in this country. They decide what truth is, and they set the rules. They are the crowned royalty of this world, and they are not nearly as sensitive to societal injustice as the oppressed.

One does not have to look far to see societal privilege in action. Two recent legislative bills in Colorado reek of privilege. Senator John Andrews has been trying to convince the legislature to pass a bill that would allow the posting of the Ten Commandments in public classrooms, and the Colorado House just passed a ban on gay marriages. Being privileged means not having to worry about how these bills and potential laws may infringe on your liberty.

Being privileged also means not having to worry about how to enter a building that is not wheelchair accessible. It means not having to face the awkwardness of a person wishing you “Merry Christmas” even though you don’t celebrate the holiday. It means not having to feel the suspicious and scared eyes that bore into you at a store simply because your skin is dark.

So sad, this state of ours. With all the recent violence in Colorado and nearby regions, much of it fueled by prejudice, the state lawmakers have decided to fritter time away trying to ban gay marriages and post the Ten Commandments in schools.

What a waste.

Colorado should respond to the bludgeoning of Mathew Shepard, the mass murder of Denver's homeless, Nathan Thill's atrocities, and the hatred displayed at Columbine with ongoing forums on racism, prejudice, and most importantly, privilege.

Much of the nation does not know what this fast-growing state stands for other than luxury ski resorts; playgrounds for the white and wealthy. Colorado should be the state that publicly attacks privilege, the sick and unexamined sibling of almost any "ism". Coloradans should demand no less than for Denver to become the anti-prejudice capital of the country.

We could start with racism and proceed to other "isms" from there. In Denver, and every other city in this country, being white is a passport. It opens doors, grants opportunities, shields from prejudice, and swaddles a person in protection. Do we have the courage and empathy to look at it?

It is not the responsibility of people of color to educate white people about racism and privilege. Racism is primarily a white person's problem, just as rape is primarily a male problem. For racism to end, whites must begin talking to each other and responding to Victor's above statement: What does it mean to be White and benefit from societal privilege?

If we are brave enough to face privilege, it will no longer feel like a pea. It will be an ever-present rock boring into our backs, reminding us that anything but awareness and action is unacceptable.

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