

Privilege Will Rock You to Sleep

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



I benefit from a tremendous amount of privilege. I have, throughout my life, received the benefit of the doubt, from people, organizations, and institutions, including when I did not deserve it. When you are on the advantaged side of things, privilege is a terribly easy thing to not see.

Two things seem to come quickly and quietly to most human beings: the belief in their own inherent goodness, and doubts about the inherent goodness of folks different from them. This makes it terribly easy for me to see my successes as fully earned, and the challenges, difficulties, and shortcomings of others as equally earned. For a big fat slice of my life, I said things like (out loud and in public), “If black people don’t want to be jailed disproportionately, they should stop breaking the law.” It never occurred to me that the complex system of people, policy, and process involved might treat different people in different ways.

It feels gross proclaiming it publicly, but on most days I am quite taken with my own goodness. And when you and I talk politics, for example, if your politics do not take the correct form, I am very ready to spot proof of your lack of sincerity, lack of intelligence, bad intentions.

I see the world from my perspective, I am at the center, and if there is something wrong, well, it must be out there somewhere.

When I was first confronted with the idea that I benefit from privilege, my response to that poor soul was something along the lines of, “Oh, I’m sorry. You don’t know who the \$#%# I am.” The idea that I was privileged was offensive to me, because of what the word meant to me at that time.

To me, privilege was about lazy, spoiled, entitled folks who had everything handed to them and who took everything for granted. I had not faced a great deal of real adversity in my life, but I also had not had things handed to me.

I grew up on a working family farm, key word working. I spent four years on active duty in the United States Marine Corps infantry, not a comfortable, leisurely way of life. When I looked around, I did not see any privilege; I saw the choices that I had made, the effort that I had applied, the actions I had taken.

Privilege had rocked me to sleep.

One of my favorite analogies for privilege is that first bike ride of spring. It dawns

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on you that swimsuit season is rapidly approaching, and you decide to get the mountain bike out for a bit of exercise. You get a mile or two down the trail and are pleasantly surprised at what good shape you are in. In spite of the fact that you have not exercised since last swimsuit season, you feel fit and fast. You even decide to go farther than your original plan.

Eventually you feel like you have gone far enough for the first ride of the year, and stop to turn around.

And when you turn around...

All of sudden, you are acutely aware of the fact that there is a pretty stiff wind at work on this day, but it had been at your back on the way out. While you were busy being pleasantly surprised at your own fitness, you had actually been benefiting from the reality of the environment you were in.

You still went out on a bike ride, you still applied effort, but the field was not level. You were, in effect, riding downhill.

When you are on the advantaged side of things, privilege is a terribly easy thing to not see.

Privilege is a matter of unearned advantage afforded members of social groups simply because of their memberships in those groups. It is not a matter of what you have done or not done as an individual.

I once worked for an organization in which the overall workforce was very balanced as far as gender, but if you went far enough up the corporate ladder, all of the women disappeared. Those men on the senior leadership team saw nothing wrong with that, as they were (as we all are) convinced of their own merit and goodness and equally convinced that the system (which had promoted them) was just.

Can you really believe that this is a just or good outcome without also believing that men are inherently better at leadership?

If you are a part of a team like this or know of one, maybe it is time to call the question: do you believe that talent is equally distributed, or do you believe that one gender group or racial group is inherently better at leadership? If you believe talent is equally distributed, but your outcomes do not reflect that, it is a sign that opportunity is not equally distributed.

As you look around at your organization, who gets hired, who gets promoted, who

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is in charge? And what do those outcomes say about your organization's true beliefs regarding talent?

Have you been sleeping?

Be good to each other.