

## **A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE of POWER & PRIVILEGE**

### **A personal essay by Kenton Boutillier July 2020**

Today we are going to explore power and privilege, and my approach is going to be a personal one. That means I am going to talk about me, my identity and some forces that shaped my life. Some unpleasant factors and experiences. But then I am going to disclose a long, but by no means exhaustive, list of my privileges as a white male individual. In general, I am not comfortable with sharing about my life but since I preach a lot about becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable, I should lead with example. I am also mindful of how blessed I am as a white person to know BIPOC individuals who, although having suffered trauma are still willing to share their stories and experiences that we all may learn. So this is, in part, to honour those willing to open deep wounds to share new knowledge. Let's begin.

I am a queer, white, European settler male. My entire life I have been a guest on Treaty 6 Territory, and I am on a life-long journey to practice better allyship. I grew up gay living rurally outside a village with a population of less than 500 people throughout the eighties and nineties. From an early age there was a lot of social, and unspoken, pressure to be ashamed of who I was and hide who I was. It was not an easy childhood and for my own safety I sought refuge in the proverbial 'closet'. I worked so hard to stay hidden that I would even walk with a limp for a quasi-irrational fear that my (completely normal) walk would give me away. The word fag, as common as racist rhetoric, was thrown around a lot. Casual comments of threats and hate towards

anyone who didn't fit into our village mold. These were ubiquitous refrains. I had no mentors or templates to emulate and did not see myself anywhere and sat in constant awkwardness and fear. I reasoned the only way to truly live and possibly be happy was to get out and head to the "big city" of Edmonton which to me seemed much cooler, and even exotic. And I thought for sure it would be accepting and easier.

I enrolled in University and, although it took some time, I made my way out of the closet and worked on being the authentic me. But I was wrong about accepting and easy. At that time, the Edmonton pride parade was a mere 8 floats and hidden away downtown on the side streets. Protesting the parade was a 100% occurrence and although there was a lot of pride, there was still familiar anxiety, apprehension, and fear. Fear that was logical and well-earned as being an out gay man in the late nineties was still dangerous. My experiences with that fear and danger include having my life threatened for who I am, in fact I've been beaten and assaulted. Beyond that, I have been spat on, had things like rocks, bottles and coffee thrown at me walking down a public street. Day or night. Numerous times. I had left a rural frying pan and landed right in the urban fire.

That was a couple decades ago but being gay even today still is not fully accepted. Globally, people in the queer community die every day either by harm from others or, tragically, themselves. We are still discriminated against in employment, by goods and services, citizens and governments, simply for existing. Pride parades may

be larger, grander and on the surface there seem to be more people who want to be allies and fewer protesters, but discrimination and ignorance still exist. An example of this is Canadian Blood services. I am automatically discriminated from donating blood as a queer male. Yet during blood drives I get asked all the time if I will contribute. I find it odd that they cannot tell that I am queer, but once they know, can automatically assume my blood is not viable. I understand the work and passion of the volunteers, but they have no concept of how crushing it is to not be able to donate due to homophobia and being confronted with that barrier. And most disappointing, I am O negative the universal donor.

With that brief glimpse into my personal dossier, I want to turn the focus on the idea that though I am a white, queer male, I am still very much white and male; and no matter what negative experiences I have had, I am still afforded a lot of advantage and privilege because of that.

## **A STUDY OF PRIVILEGE DISCLAIMER**

This is an exploration of my own privileges. A lot of them will likely be common to you readers, especially if you are a white male like me. This is simply an exercise in taking the time to practice introspection and awareness. A process I encourage all of you to try on a semi-regular basis.

For the purposes of this essay I will take just a glimpse at five main privilege categories:

- ❖ White privilege;

- ❖ Gender privilege;
- ❖ Able privilege;
- ❖ Socio-economic privilege; and
- ❖ Sexual Orientation privilege

I am going to focus a lot on white privilege but as we go through the list, I also want you to consider the intersectionality that exists between them and start thinking about their nuances and their weight.

### **White privilege**

I am white. Not just white, like fish-belly white. I have light hair, and green eyes. I am of French and English descent, the OG colonizers. I can pass, and have been incorrectly assumed to be, Danish, Finish, Ukrainian, and Metis to name only a few. This is why it is so important in this work that I socially locate myself as a white European.

I have never been made to feel unsafe, or in danger due to the colour of my skin, awkward maybe, but never in danger. I have never feared for my life strictly because I am white.

In our white-centric world I am often addressed first or listened to, and responded to, more purposefully than people of colour I have worked with. I have heard comments about other races in public and in private all my life. Some people automatically

assume others share their prejudices... it amazes me still that people are ignorant enough, because it's not brave or a hallmark of intelligence, to do this.

When push comes to shove and the chips are down, white elites are going to pick me for their dodge-ball team, regardless of any lack of privilege, before they pick someone of colour.

I can buy houses in any neighbourhood that I can afford. Security does not follow me around when I shop, and I am way less likely to be profiled. Even if I did break the law, criminal sentences are far more lenient or non-existent. In fact, generally, when I see people on the street and smile, 99% of the time they smile back at me.

Television and movies have catered to my skin colour for most of my life. I have seen so many transitions in entertainment being called progress, but only at the surface level. Rarely systemic or sustainable. We still see problems in Hollywood every day with Racism or Sexism. Books and literature are written from, and for, my perspectives and it is easy to find many sources.

I carry the invisible cloak of manifest destiny. A constructed narrative that says we won; we deserve this. White people don't have to think of our own colour, we are taught that we are here because we earned it and the concept of merit has a totally different meaning. We are the norm and somehow deserve what we have.

As a white person I have more room to speak up. I can use things like shame as a tool more readily than others. I can get angry and not be bound by performativity and the constraints that are imposed on people of colour.

I can walk away from the work of social accountability, my current job and integrate somewhere else and could choose to turn a blind eye. Ostensibly it would be easy. That is huge white privilege. I am often asked why I don't look for something that is less intensive, or I hear comments that this seems like a lot of hard work. It is precisely because I belong to these systems with the privileges I have that it is important to me to do this work. I think of the mantra of "If not me, then who? If not now, then when?"

### **Gender Privilege**

Specifically, I am a white male. Because of this, I am usually addressed before my female colleagues. Or when my female colleagues ask questions the answers are given to me. Things are confided to me by men and even other women behind their backs. Boys will be boys, that old trope that allows for a lot of inexcusable behaviour and is clear toxic masculinity, is still applied too often.

### **Able Privilege**

I have my health. My whole family does. I am chubby yes, but even that fact is in some cases a sign of privilege. The world is designed for me. The time it takes an able person

to do things compared to those with less mobility is taken for granted. The fact is that I can pretty much do what I want, except for International cat-burglar. Those days are behind me! My size is considered intimidating and my voice and presence are large

### **Socio-economic Privilege**

Yes, I grew up poor. Still I benefit from underpaid overseas labour which keeps the costs of my food and clothing low. But even without much advantage in this area, I think I have demonstrated that my privilege in general is monumental.

### **Sexual Orientation Privilege**

Sure, as a gay man, I have had a disgusting amount of bullshit to deal with, but as a white gay man, I hold so much more privilege than many members of my own global community. I am non-visible, as long as I keep my mouth shut. I have the societal advantage of appearing straight, I am not stereotyped immediately. I have so-called 'masculine' privilege. Again, this is a toxic concept, but it is a systemic concept and I benefit from it.

Heartbreakingly within my own community there are my brothers and sisters who are people of colour, non-binary, and trans who are still facing incredible hatred and discrimination. People who hardly ever get to see themselves represented in a positive light in any media. White queers have a huge responsibility to not get comfortable with

our own gains. We need to be turning around, reaching out our hands and making sure no one is left behind.

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE**

So, after all that, what can we do or take serious time to think about? Here is a list of what I like to call **Anthems of the Privileged**. If we hear these or find ourselves singing these words, then we know we are off course and could benefit from some introspection and recalibration.

- ❖ This is too hard
- ❖ Why should I do this?
- ❖ Can't they just help themselves?
- ❖ This doesn't affect me
- ❖ This is too awkward and uncomfortable
- ❖ All lives matter
- ❖ I didn't create the system and I can't change it
- ❖ I don't see race or colour

### **Some final things to consider:**

- ❖ Chances are particularly good that you have privilege
- ❖ Are you white? Then you almost certainly have privilege
- ❖ If you are experiencing an infringement on your rights, or your being for the first time in your adult life then you have privilege

- ❖ If you become aware of a situation that infringes on someone else's rights, and/or being, but you can walk away from it and it would seemingly not affect you again, you have privilege
- ❖ If reading any of the above points upset you, and you immediately come up with examples of why you do not have privilege, you have privilege

I want to conclude this essay with a suggestion remind you of the mantra I mentioned above. Take some time to examine your life in these categories and how they reflect on the world around you. You may surprise yourself. It is a simple, but eye-opening exercise. And I leave you with one final quote, from Bill Bullard, a member of former member of both houses of Michigan Legislature, and a Republican no less:

“Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another's world. It requires profound purpose larger than the self kind of understanding”