



REMEMBERING THE PAST

Truth and White Privilege

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Deuteronomy 4:9 states, “However, be on your guard and be very careful not to forget the things your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your heart as long as you live; but make them known to your children and to your children’s children.” This verse is written on the walls of the sanctuary inside the National Holocaust Museum and serves both as a plea to remember the horrors of the past and, I feel, as an admonition because we, as a country, have not. Racism has so infected the collective social consciousness that people lie about the oppression they saw with their own eyes and have denied their children and grandchildren the truth in favor of a fiction.

This is not a new phenomenon. Thomas Jefferson boldly wrote that “all men were created equal,” yet died a slave-owner. Large swaths of white America still claim that the Civil War, a generous title for what was really a slave-holder’s rebellion, was not fought over slavery despite the slave states plainly stating that the impetus for their rebellion was their fear of the abolition of slavery. We see it today with the current public

debates over the impact of racism and the existence of white privilege. There can be no movement towards racial reconciliation without a full acknowledgement of what white privilege is and who is responsible for its continued existence.

Bryan Massingale writes, “White privilege shifts the focus from how people of color are harmed by racism to how white Americans derive advantages because of it.”¹ White privilege has a multitude of definitions. In keeping with Massingale’s position and Peggy McIntosh’s work, I define white privilege as “unearned advantage and conferred dominance” that resulted from the historic creation of policy on all levels of governance dedicated to promoting white supremacy in the United States at the detriment of racial minorities.² People of color were barred from entering certain occupations, from attending schools and universities that would provide them with access to certain sectors of employment, and from living where they chose. They even had their tax dollars allocated for white-only serving projects. White supremacy was the official position of American

government and all of its institutions, supported by the majority of white society, from the founding of the nation until segregation society began to collapse in the 1960's. The impact of this period on American culture is white privilege. To put it in perspective, out of 399 years of African American history, black people have been "free" for 50 years. Any honest debate about the pertinent issues of the day that dismisses the facts of American racial history is an intellectually dishonest endeavor.

It should be noted that racism and white privilege are not interchangeable concepts but they are related. Robin DiAngelo writes, "Racism is not fluid in the U.S.; it does not flow back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color."³ Anyone can be racist on an interpersonal level; but to be institutionally and systemically racist—the kinds of racism creating inequities and oppression—requires power over institutions and government. Only white people currently possess this level of power.

Who is responsible for white privilege? They are those who are its active supporters and those who are complicit in its maintenance. In order to oppress, the actual work of oppression must have the support of the critical mass of the oppressive group, or the critical mass must be complicit through tolerance or non-resistance. Oppression is a culture-wide project. Daniel Goldhagen asserted this paradigm in his landmark *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. He writes:

The program's first parts, namely the systematic exclusion of Jews from German economic and social life, were carried out in the open, under approving eyes, and with the complicity of virtually all sectors of German society, from the legal, medical, and teaching professions, to the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, to the gamut of economic, social and cultural groups and associations. Hundreds of thousands of Germans contributed to the genocide and the still larger system of subjugation that was the vast concentration camp system.⁴

The historical oppression of African Americans in the United States and the Holocaust are different events with different outcomes, but each could only happen with the complicity and support of the larger society. The same is true of white privilege.

Why does the subject of white privilege make segments of white society uncomfortable? It is because white privilege is a confirmation of a deeply entrenched

anti-black sentiment in the United States that required widespread white support. Anti-blackness is central to the implementation and defense of slavery, segregation society, and white privilege. In order for millions of African Americans to be oppressed in the manner which they were, slavery and segregation society had to receive both widespread complicity and willing participants. White Americans have largely been isolated from full knowledge of the actions of their distant ancestors, grandparents, and parents—which undermines the narrative of meritocracy—so the response to the disclosures of white privilege has typically been one of defensive moves designed to return the discourse to one safely ensconced in a white dominated orientation.⁵

Abraham Lincoln said in his lyceum speech, "As a nation of free men we will live forever or die by suicide."⁶ The stakes today are no less dire. America shall have racial reconciliation or it shall have unceasing conflict in order to preserve white privilege. The choice between human dignity and white privilege is ours to make. Just as white privilege can only exist with widespread support, progress can only happen with widespread support. Slavery and segregation society collapsed because of the efforts of people of color and millions of white people of good will; yet, this work is not complete. How can one undermine white privilege and move the society towards progress? Be active in removing the laws, policies, and practices which support white supremacy and privilege. All progress begins with telling the truth to ourselves. Only then can we give our children and grandchildren more than fiction—we can give them a world in which dignity is not the privilege of a few but rather the right of all.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Massingale, B. N. (2014). *Racial justice and the Catholic Church*. Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 36-37..
- 2 McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Race, class, and gender in the United States: An integrated study*, 4, 165-169.
- 3 DiAngelo, R. (2011). *White fragility*. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3), 36.
- 4 Goldhagen, Daniel. (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York, NY: Alfred A Knop, 8.
- 5 DiAngelo, 57.
- 6 Lincoln, Abraham. (January 27, 1838). Retrieved from <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>