

## **Reflections on the Intersectionality of Unearned Privilege**

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During a recent event called “Engage Difference<sup>1</sup>” led by the Canadian Churches Forum on Global Ministries I was struck early on by comments from two White participants.

The first paraphrased Pope Francis remarking that truth is not to be found in agreement with particular concepts or beliefs or ideologies but instead in the quality of a relationship, a way and a life

*... The truth, according to Christian faith, is God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. So the truth is a relationship! Each one of us receives the truth and expresses it in his or her own way, from the history, culture and situation in which he or she lives ... it means that [truth] is given to us always and only as a way and a life...<sup>2</sup>,*

The second expressed a heartfelt desire to reflect on and examine how to understand the effects of the intersectionality of oppression as a person of privilege.

### **Truth, power and relationships**

As a result of their comments I found myself reflecting on living truth as the quality of a relationship - a way and a life - and the function of power and privilege in relationships.

Because “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”<sup>3</sup>, concepts and theories of Racism, racial discrimination, unearned privilege and White privilege are commonly used to describe relationships in conflict and in trouble, where truth is not found. Frequently other xenophobias and identities are brought into the conversation and the theory or concept of interlocking oppression is frequently used to describe how those oppressions, discriminations and denials of identity reinforce and magnify one another.

### **Shifting the focus from oppression to privilege**

Recently, when addressing members of the dominant culture, White<sup>4</sup> people, on these issues I have seen a shift from focusing on Racism<sup>5</sup> - racial discrimination and the discriminatory experiences of people of colour (and so risking reliving and revictimizing people of colour in the

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<sup>1</sup> A program offered at the Sandy Saulteaux Spiritual Centre in Beausejour, Manitoba from November 28 – December 1, 2017, led by Jonathan Schmidt at the Canadian Churches’ Forum: <http://www.ccforum.ca/duim>.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis in his letter to Eugenio Scalfari, Nov. 9, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Lewin, Kurt. Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers (D. Cartwright, Ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951.

<sup>4</sup> I am using White in the way the history of White people is described in: *The History of White People* by Nell Irvin Painter, W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Racism as in “prejudice plus the systemic misuse of power”.

story-telling) - to unearned privilege and its effect on White people (wealth and the possibility of inaction conferred on privileged people, otherwise known as White privilege). Now, I wonder about shifting the focus from interlocking oppression(s) and intersectionality to interlocking unearned privilege and its intersectionality.

### **Power and Privilege**

Peggy McIntosh first developed the concept of privilege in relation to men and women (male privilege) then later applied it to power relationships between White people and other races or cultures (White privilege).

#### **Wikinfo Definition of Privilege<sup>6</sup>**

In a broader sense, 'privilege' can refer to special powers or 'de facto' immunities held as a consequence of political power or wealth. Privilege of this sort may be transmitted by birth into a privileged class or achieved through individual actions.

#### **Peggy McIntosh on White Privilege**

White privilege is 'an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious.'<sup>7</sup>

The features of unearned privilege that have puzzled and frustrated me are the *invisibility* to its carrier; its *persistence* in - unbeknownst to the carrier - enhancing personal and group power over the long-term; and its *outside agency*, that is, it is conferred on the carrier by others.

### **Intersectionality of unearned privilege**

These features make unearned privilege particularly challenging to undo or unravel or remove. Now, when unearned privilege is multiplied by intersecting unearned privileges (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, and so on) the problem can become acute. As a 55-year old straight White able-bodied man in active positions of power and authority, the question arises: how can I live in truth defined as the quality of a relationship where power and privilege are everywhere present, often invisible, persistent and conferred on me by history and others? Confession, atonement, regret, and guilt may be neither healthy responses nor effective ones in transforming relationships to a way and a life of truth.

### **Towards unraveling unearned privilege**

I have no answers, only questions at this point, that I am interested in sharing with you, the reader. Below please find questions for reflection, possible responses for people suffering from the intersectionality of unearned privilege, and some sources of inspiration and challenge.

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<sup>66</sup> <http://wikinfo.org/m/index.php/Privilege>

<sup>77</sup> "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," by Peggy McIntosh. 1988.

## Part 1: Questions for Reflection

- What features of unearned privilege puzzle and frustrate you?
- How is colour or Race the lynchpin of intersectionality? By lynchpin I mean the strongest indicator of difference and the one most likely to predict different treatment.
- One way to address intersecting oppressions is to stand in solidarity with people having those experiences. How and where does unraveling intersecting unearned privilege shift the focus of reflection and action?
- What are some ways *individuals* suffering from intersecting unearned privileges can live in truth and in so doing unravel their unearned privilege?
- What are some ways *peoples* or *groups* suffering from intersecting unearned privileges can live in truth and in so doing unravel their unearned privilege?

## Part 2: Responding to the intersectionality of unearned privilege

A short list of responses for persons suffering from the intersectionality of unearned privilege: persons and organizations. What responses, tips, decisions would you add to the list?

### *Personal responses*

1. Name it, tell others when you see it.
2. Acknowledge it to others when you feel it.
3. Never let a comment conferring unearned privilege pass in your hearing without recognizing it.
4. Confer (unearned) privilege on others who do not have it conferred on them (we all live by grace, let not unearned privileged people set an impossible standard or a higher standard than we experience ourselves).
5. Invite others without your unearned privilege to tell you what they see and pull back the blinders, if only temporarily. Be ready to see it when they are lifted!
6. Slow down; wait; be attentive; practice mutual invitation and other structured conversation tools such as the talking circle or World Café.
7. Nominate and appoint others with less or no interlocking unearned privilege(s) to positions of authority.

### *Organizational responses*

8. Get to know and master using power tools<sup>8</sup> in your organization, such as
  - a) **resource sharing** (e.g. what assets get named as resources, which ones are acknowledged

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<sup>8</sup> I first learned the names of these five power tools from Sunitha Mortha, Global Mission Unit, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

as shared, when ones are shared),

b) **storytelling** (e.g. whose story is told, how many stories are shared, who gets to tell it in person, how much time is set aside for the story),

c) **expertise recognizing** (e.g. who is recognized as an expert, a keeper of knowledge, and drawn on when making decisions),

d) **network building** (e.g. who belongs in the [formal and informal] networks, which networks are resourced, how do the networks function as relationships that maintain or unravel unearned privilege), and

e) **decision-making** (e.g. who makes decisions, how are they participatory or not, how is transparency in decision-making demonstrated).

### **Part 3. Looking for inspiration: some theological/Biblical reflection questions**

1. What insight does the Biblical story of the rich young man and the parable of the camel and the eye of the needle offer to reflection on this conundrum? *Matthew 19:16-28*
2. Jesus is Way Truth Life. How do the stories told about Jesus demonstrate truth as the quality of a relationship? What features of Jesus' way of life come to mind that we can best imitate when living in the midst of power and unearned privilege?
3. How have interpretations of the sacred scriptures themselves appeared to, or been used to, magnify and contribute to the persistence of the intersectionality of unearned privilege?