

Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack

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A few years ago, I went out to dinner with a friend. He had to compile a list of all the times he came into contact with law enforcement for law school and he was complaining to me about all the tickets he'd gotten. All things like driving without a seat belt, or rolling through a stop sign, or failing to signal. Minor things, but the way he was telling it, it sounded like a ton of tickets.

So I made some kind of joke that, I promise you, was not even clever, like, "Oh you're a bad driver, I better let you leave first."

He just looked at me. "Well, you know I was always driving through small towns."

Silence descended over our table. The wheels turned slowly in my head. "Of course, he's more likely to be stopped by the police because he's Black." The wheels spun a little faster. "I just made a joke about racial profiling."

So this is privilege.

And you know, at the time, I was working at the ACLU. I was literally working on racial profiling issues. But in that moment, I was blinded by my own experience.

So this is privilege.

In that moment and in the days that followed, I thought a lot about that joke. I thought a lot about that day. Let me tell you, I felt terrible, and I thought a lot about how terrible I felt.

But I didn't think about other things. I didn't think of all the days preceding that one when the cops didn't pull me over. I didn't think about the time and money that I saved by avoiding those tickets. I didn't think about how much safer I was when I had come in contact with law enforcement. I didn't give much thought at all to the systems that permit me to expect and receive fair and just treatment from the police.

I only thought about my joke, and how I felt it marked me as a privileged white person.

When we talk about privilege it is often in very personal or individual terms. Clearly, myself included. I've noticed a pattern whenever I talk to anyone – from teenagers on up – about what it means to be an ally or what it means to have privilege.

First, having privilege means that you can say things that negate other people's experiences. "I said this or someone said that." Second, being an ally means you stand up to those statements. It means that you call people out. "Check your privilege."

Clearly, I was falling into that as well when it came to the white privilege I experience.

What's interesting, is that when I hear similar patterns from people talking about heterosexual or male privilege, it really bothers me.

Let me explain.

Whenever I talk to someone about straight privilege, one of the first examples I always hear is that a sign of privilege is when some straight person asks a lesbian if they have a boyfriend or assumes she is married to a man. And if you're a queer ally, the thing to do is to call that straight person out.

And those types of examples bother me because they miss so much of the real oppression that queer folks face.

So, I'm a lesbian, and there are many times when people have assumed I'm straight and have asked about my kids' dad. My younger daughter has red hair and I could fill a book with the number of times people have asked if daddy is a redhead.

And it's kind of annoying. It's uncomfortable. You have to decide, on the spot, how much of your personal, family, and reproductive history you want to share with say, the check out lady at the store. It's annoying, but it is only annoying.

If you want to know what really concerns me as a lesbian, those questions aren't it. What gets me is that, even with marriage equality, people in some parts of Ohio can still be fired for being gay. What really bothers me is that LGBT youth are over-represented among incarcerated youth. What I worry about are the murders of trans people – especially trans women of color.

As a lesbian, there are a lot of things that I'm really concerned about. I'm not going to list them all. So suffice to say, one thing they all have in common: they are not comments from the check-out lady. Another thing they have in common, they aren't solved by somebody calling their friend out on non-inclusive language. In fact, they are complex, systemic issues that will require significant change to make better.

Take just one of the things I mentioned – the over-representation of LGBT youth in the criminal justice system. This is an issue that involves huge systems and institutions. It involves big issues:

- How we protect kids whose families can't or won't care for them.
- How we prosecute kids whose crimes are really just survival tactics.
- How we decide when a kid is a victim and not a criminal.

We need to look at the criminal justice system to help these kids. We need to look at the education, public health, and behavioral health systems too.

It's complicated, but these are the issues I really care about.

So when people focus on personal or individual issues, I worry that the larger injustices are missed. It drives me crazy that, with all the oppression that LGBT folks face, so many people think that confronting someone about a heterosexist comment is the most important thing.

I see the same pattern on a larger scale nationally.

Donald Trump recently made some statements about immigrants from Mexico. I'm going to go out on a limb and call them inflammatory. The gist is that pretty much all immigrants from Mexico are rapists and criminals.

As a result, companies have been running away from Trump and his brand. Macy's won't carry his merchandise any more, No more Miss America on NBC. Celebrity Apprentice fired Trump.

Now, I would never defend those remarks. But I want to ask one question: What is all this doing to actually help immigrants?

Actually I have some more questions: If NBC cares so much about Latino experience, why is it that last year, they eliminated the NBC Latino division? Why did they fire half of the Latino journalists who had staffed that division? And hasn't Macy's been hit with lawsuits for racially profiling its shoppers?

You know, it's almost like these companies care more about avoiding the appearance of being a bunch of racist xenophobes than they care about not being racist xenophobes.

When we allow ourselves to buy into the idea that privilege is all about the personal interactions, the individual statements, we miss the big picture. When we allow ourselves to buy into the idea that being an ally is all about "calling people out," we miss the big picture. We allow ourselves to be assuaged with symbolic gestures, instead of real change.

Now I'd like to come back to that story from the beginning – about having dinner with my friend. I felt like such a jerk afterward, and finally when I saw him a few weeks later, I said that I was really sorry for the joke about his experiences with the police. He waited for me to say more, and I realized that he had no idea what I was talking about.

It seemed like such a "big deal." I had felt like a great big privileged jerk for weeks. But for him, it apparently didn't even register.

And now that I think about it, I realize that I didn't just show my privilege when I failed to realize that race was a factor in all those tickets. I showed my privilege by thinking that what really mattered was my dumb joke. I showed my privilege when I thought that my accidental joke about an injustice mattered more than the actual injustice.

If I really want to check my privilege, I need to start doing more than just talking about it.