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## UNRAVELING WHITENESS AND WHITE PRIVILEGE: A PERSONAL AND FAMILY NARRATIVE

As a white person who wants to play an active role in movements for social justice, I have come to recognize that I must become conscious of my own position within the systems of power and privilege that permeate our society. Unless I engage in this process, I will continue to behave in ways that perpetuate the very systems that I want to change. Writing this essay is part of my process of working toward that consciousness. I hope that others will find it useful in their own efforts.

### **Earliest Influences**

In anti-racism workshops I have participated in, a common question has been “How old were you when you first became aware that you were white?” Common answers are “Four.” or “Six.” After much consideration, I have concluded that the most truthful answer for me is “Forty-two.” I was taught by my mother that we were not white; we were Jews, and the dominant society did not consider Jews to be white. I believed her.

There is some truth to the contention that historically the dominant society has not considered Jews to be white. For centuries, Europeans regarded Jews as a separate race, alien and unassimilable (Hannaford, 1996). In the United States, the story is more complicated. Jews were never denied naturalization as citizens under the naturalization law of 1790, which limited eligibility for naturalization to “free white persons” (Haney Lopez, 1996).<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1840’s, however, the “scientific” study of human diversity increasingly subdivided the racial category of whiteness into hierarchically-ordered sub-races with Anglo-Saxons or Nordics at the top and Celts, Alpines, and Mediterraneans described as inferior. This development coincided with a massive increase in immigration from Ireland and later from southern and eastern Europe. Jews, often referred to as Hebrews, were sometimes classified among the less desirable varieties of whites and sometimes as non-white Semites or Asiatics. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the eugenics movement, led by an influential Protestant elite, began to push for drastic restriction of immigration and the elimination of “inferior” genes from the American gene pool. These efforts culminated in the restrictive Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 (Brodin, 1998); (Jacobson, 1998); (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1993). It was in 1924 that my mother and her parents arrived at Ellis Island. A few months later they would not have been admitted.

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<sup>1</sup> I was astonished to learn that this law was not repealed until 1952.

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The America I grew up in was very different. There were three officially recognized races, Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid. Within the Caucasian race, there were only cultural or national groups, who were rapidly assimilating in the “great American melting pot” (or so I was taught in elementary school). Eugenics had been thoroughly discredited by its association with Hitler’s campaign to exterminate groups he regarded as genetically unfit (Jacobson, 1998). To my mother, these changes were just the latest phase of the cycle of good times and bad times for the Jews. The KKK was still active and Jews were still among their targets. She wanted me to be prepared for the next turn of the wheel.

There were psychological advantages to not perceiving myself as white. I could distance myself from white oppression of other races. How could I be a white supremacist if I wasn’t white? I could (and did) even feel morally superior to Southern segregationists and Northern bigots. Remaining unaware that I was perceived and treated as white was one of the manifestations of white privilege.

Not being a racist was important to me because it was part of the progressive values I was absorbing from my parents. I was to be on the side of the oppressed, to support social justice, to be socially responsible. I knew by the age of five that there were certain racial epithets that were never to be uttered. It wasn’t until I was in my teens that I began to notice ways in which my parents’ actions failed to match their precepts. By that time, the progressive values were deeply internalized.

### **Waking up to My Own Whiteness and White Privilege**

In the 1980’s, when several women’s organizations I belonged to began to provide anti-racism trainings, I encountered the concepts of white privilege and unconscious racism and had to acknowledge that I was white and that I was frequently an unwitting participant in or beneficiary of racism. Like many white women first confronting their racial identity, I frequently felt intense shame and guilt when my ignorance tripped me up. In 1990 I wrote a paper, published in 1995 (Holzman, 1995), on shame and guilt as obstacles and as signposts in white women’s anti-racism work. The process of reading, thinking, writing, and sharing my thinking helped me to become less reactive and more open to receiving and processing new information about myself.

Peggy McIntosh’s classic paper (McIntosh, 1997) on white privilege was illuminating. So were the experiences described by African American women in the workshops I was attending. One of the exercises that were recommended for white women wanting to learn more about white privilege was to make an intentional effort to notice every instance of white privilege I encountered in the course of a day. Once they were pointed out to me, it was not difficult to recognize examples of white privilege in my daily life. I could shop in the most expensive department stores without being followed by store personnel who

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thought I might be shoplifting. I sailed past doormen and signs that said all visitors must be announced. I had sometimes been sexually harassed in the street, but no one had ever approached me because they assumed I was a prostitute. It is significant that I had to make a special effort to notice these incidents; for African American women there is no escaping the micro-aggressions that are the flip side of privilege.

### **Inheriting White Privilege**

There is more to white privilege than the benefits I experience in my day-to-day interactions with others. My comprehension of the impact of white privilege on my life has deepened as I have learned more about its place in a massive system of interlocking privileges that mutually reinforce one another (Wildman, 1996); (Hurtado, 1996); (Johnson, 2006); (Rothenberg, 2000). The following is a very incomplete account of the cumulative effects of interlocking systems of privilege from which my family has benefitted for four generations.

#### **Morris Gottfried (1894-1955)**

My paternal grandfather, Morris Gottfried, arrived in New York City from Romania in 1894, along with his mother and two older sisters, Edith and Clara. His mother was not able to care for three children and also work to support them, so she placed Clara and Morris in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum (HOA). The oldest, Edith, remained with her.

The education Morris received while he was a resident of the HOA was good enough to prepare him for night school courses in bookkeeping. He was then hired as a bookkeeper by a customs brokerage firm, thus going from destitution to a white collar occupation within a single generation. He continued to work for the same firm until he was disabled by a stroke at the age of 57. The firm continued to pay his full salary for a year after he became disabled.

It would be easy to interpret my grandfather's story as evidence that anyone can succeed in America if he or she is intelligent and willing to work hard. To do so would be to overlook the system of support that was available to him as a white-skinned Jew arriving in New York City in the late nineteenth century, and that was not available to his contemporaries of other races. Prior to 1881, the Jewish population of New York was predominantly German in origin. They had been highly assimilated in Germany, were mostly middle-class, and tended to prosper in the expanding economy of the United States. They maintained strong ties within the Jewish community and created a network of social services and charitable institutions for the benefit of Jews who were in need (Goldstein, 2006); (Rischin, 1962); (Steinberg, 2001). The Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which laid the foundation for my grandfather's socioeconomic success, was a product of their philanthropic efforts (Bogen, 1992). When it opened in 1860, most African Americans were enslaved in the South. At the time when my grandfather was

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seeking employment, the overwhelming majority of African Americans who had migrated to the North were restricted to domestic service or to the most menial industrial occupations (Steinberg, 2001); (Takaki, 1993).

My grandfather's membership in a community that had the resources to provide for its needy gave him access to formal education and to training in middle-class speech and behavior. These assets contributed to his being considered for a white-collar job that paid well enough to support a wife and two children. White privilege became entwined with class privilege and continued to compound itself in later generations.

### **Sidney Gottfried (1914-2001)**

My father, Sidney Gottfried, grew up in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, an ethnically-mixed, working- and lower-middle-class neighborhood. He attended New York City public schools, where he was an average student. In 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression, he was admitted to the NYU School of Engineering with a full scholarship. He was able to attend classes full-time because his family did not need his income to supplement his father's earnings. He covered his living expenses by working as a night counselor at Edenwald, an affiliate of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. He got the job because his uncle, Lionel Simmonds, was the superintendent of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. (Lionel and Sidney's Aunt Clara had met while both were residents of the Asylum, and married in 1908) (Bogen, 1992). This was the first time a member of my family was able draw on the assistance of an influential family member or other connection, but it was not to be the last.

From the time he graduated from engineering school, all of Sidney's jobs were based on his credentials as a civil engineer. Social Security records indicate that he began making payments in 1937, the year of the inception of the program. The Social Security system was intentionally structured by Congress to exclude most African Americans by excluding agricultural workers and domestic workers. It is estimated that three-quarters of African American workers were excluded. This included the 90 percent of African American women who were domestic workers. It also penalized those who were intermittently employed, again disadvantaging African Americans (Brown et al., 2003).

Sidney's first job after graduation was with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). During World War II he was draft-exempt because he had a job at Republic Aircraft inspecting airplanes. After the war he was laid off because Republic cut back on production. This was his first and only period of unemployment. Before long he scored well on a civil service exam and was hired by the City of New York Department of Transportation (DOT). When he left there to take a job with a private construction company, he withdrew the funds he had accrued in the DOT's pension plan and invested them in "blue chip" stocks with instructions to reinvest the dividends. His salary was always more than

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enough to cover his family's needs, so he never had to use his retirement savings for current expenses. By 1996, his initial investment of \$10,000 had grown to hundreds of thousands of dollars. When he retired from the construction company he again took his pension benefits as a lump sum and invested them, this time in tax-exempt bond funds, which gave him a substantial amount of tax-free income. When my mother died in 1996, a trusts and estates lawyer showed my father how to allow some of their jointly-held assets to pass directly to me so that when he died his assets would be less than the amount subject to the inheritance tax. A tax system that allows the wealthy to avoid paying taxes is, of course, another form of privilege. My father commented to the lawyer that when he was making \$10 a week working for the WPA, he never imagined that one day he would require the services of a trusts and estates lawyer.

At the age of 84, my father suffered a disabling stroke that made it necessary for him to have around-the-clock care, first at home and eventually in a nursing home. The nursing home, which had a reputation as the finest such facility in New York, cared for both private-pay patients and patients whose care was being paid for by Medicaid at a much lower level of reimbursement. Patients received the same quality of care from the nursing home staff regardless of the source of payment. But my father and a number of the other private-pay patients were able to afford private-duty caregivers in addition to the overworked nursing home staff. The difference this made in the patients' quality of life was staggering.

**Clare Gottfried Holzman (1942- )**

**Housing.** My earliest memories of home are of an apartment in Parkchester, a huge housing development in the Bronx built by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in response to a growing housing shortage in New York City (Parkchester, 2016). They later built Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village in lower Manhattan and, as I learned much later, Riverton Houses in Harlem. Parkchester and Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village accepted only white tenants. Riverton Houses rented mostly to African Americans. The absence of African Americans in my world, except peripherally, did not register with me at all.

In 1951, when I was nine years old, my parents and I moved into a new cooperative housing development, Queensview (Pink, 1952). Its creation was part of a federal program to provide housing for middle-income families. The land for the development was acquired with the help of the City of New York, which condemned the site as part of a slum clearance and redevelopment program. The city also granted a 25-year partial real estate tax exemption. Another life insurance company, The Mutual of New York, provided the financing at a very favorable interest rate. This plus the tax exemption kept the monthly maintenance charges far below prevailing rates for comparable apartments in New York. Although there was an upper limit on the income of families that were permitted

to move in, there was no further scrutiny of their income later on. (In the low-income city housing projects in New York, occupied mostly by people of color, the subsidized rent is increased if the tenant's income increases.) Many of them were well-positioned to become financially successful, and although some of them later moved to the suburbs, many others remained, still paying what were essentially government-subsidized rents.

Queensview was the first private housing development to rent to both whites and African Americans. However, the requirement of a substantial initial payment to buy shares in the cooperative made it inaccessible to most African American families. Of 726 apartments, only about a dozen were occupied by African Americans; most of them were civil rights activists committed to promoting integrated housing.

The cooperative was very successful and soon had a long waiting list for vacancies. In 1964, when the children of the first cohort of shareholders were looking for homes of their own, the cooperative voted to give them preference over "outsiders" on the waiting list. I was one of the many who took advantage of this opportunity. Since there were so few African American families to begin with, this policy virtually guaranteed that the development would remain almost entirely white. The amount of money I saved on rent every month was a major contribution to my ability to accumulate wealth. (Eventually this policy was ruled a violation of the city's Human Rights Law and was changed.)

**Education.** The story of my education is a story of privilege begetting more privilege. When I was in elementary school, two new schools were built within walking distance of my home and a few blocks apart from each other. They were built from the same set of plans and looked virtually identical. The school district lines were drawn so that children from two public housing projects, mostly African American and Puerto Rican, went to P. S. 111 and children from my white, middle- and working-class neighborhood went to P. S. 112. Further sorting took place within P. S. 112, which created "homogeneously grouped" classes based on our scores on standardized reading tests. Most of the children in my class lived in the same cooperative housing development as I did. Their parents were mostly college graduates and had occupations such as schoolteacher, physician, insurance salesman, owner of a small business, etc. In the sixth grade we were tested for placement in junior high school. Along with most of my classmates I was placed in a "special progress" class that covered three years of work in two years. In the ninth grade we were encouraged to take the standardized tests for the specialized, highly selective public high schools, Hunter College High School, Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science, and Music and Art. I was accepted at Hunter, at that time almost entirely white. I did well in high school, scored well on the standardized College Board exams, and was accepted by Barnard College, along with about twenty of my classmates. The level of instruction at Hunter had been such that at Barnard I was placed in a third-year

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French class and was exempted from Freshman English. The level of instruction in the Department of Psychology at Barnard was such that in graduate school I was exempted from all of the basic core psychology courses. The course in personality theory at Barnard had been taught by a graduate student from the program I later enrolled in, and used the same textbook as the graduate-level course.

When I was accepted by Barnard, my parents informed me that they had begun setting money aside for my college education before I was born. Since the money for my college expenses was already in place, any scholarship money I was awarded and anything I had saved from my allowance was mine to spend as I wished. Since they continued to cover my living expenses, my savings stayed in my savings account, along with my earnings from summer jobs while I was in college. There was never any question of my having to earn money during the school year, either in high school or in college.

A number of people in my parents' social circle were in a position to help me out in various ways. Between my junior and senior years in high school, having aged out of summer camp, I wanted to take some courses in summer school. It happened that an unusual number of students had failed the Regents exams that year, and needed to retake a course over the summer to make up the credits. It was announced that they would be given priority over other students. A friend of my parents taught in the school I wanted to attend. She offered to make sure my application "got into the right pile". At first I protested that it would be unfair for me to take advantage of such favoritism. This angered my mother, who said I was being foolishly idealistic. My father told my mother that she couldn't really blame me for wanting to act on the principles they had taught me, but I couldn't handle my mother's disapproval and acquiesced to the injustice. When I had difficulty with a college calculus course, I was tutored first by a family friend who was a math teacher and then by an electrical engineer who used calculus in his work. (The engineer, who showed me how to "cookbook" the solutions to the problems, was much more helpful than the math teacher, who wanted me to understand the material. I never did understand it, but I passed the final.)

**Employment.** The summer after I graduated from high school, my father got me a job as a vacation replacement for the typists and switchboard operator in his office. The summer after that, when I wanted a job that was related to my major, my parents called a friend of theirs who was a psychologist working for a vocational rehabilitation agency. He got me a job in the typing pool, where I typed up the evaluations and progress reports of the various professionals. After I graduated from college, I took a federal civil service exam, scored well, and was hired as a civilian employee on an Army base, doing psychological research.

**Marriage.** I met my husband-to-be when my cousin was dating his best friend and they arranged a double date. We were all white, Jewish, and middle-class. Bob was in college when we met and entered medical school two years

later. His father paid his medical school tuition. When we got married, we furnished our first apartment with hand-me-downs and wedding gifts. I used most of my savings to buy a car, which made it possible for me to take a job twenty miles away from home that paid 25 percent more than the job I was offered closer to home. That left \$4717, the rest of my savings and the proceeds of an investment my mother had made for me when I was ten. Knowing that that money was there in case we needed it provided a sense of security that was very welcome. We also knew that our parents would be willing and able to help us out financially if we ever needed them to. Although our income was modest, it was slightly more than our expenses, which allowed us to begin investing a small amount every month in a mutual fund. We learned about this strategy for wealth-building from Bob's father, who worked in the investment office of a bank that would never have hired him if he hadn't been white.

**Medical care.** Another form of privilege I benefit from is high-quality medical care that does not waste my time or assault my human dignity. Some of this privilege is bestowed on anyone who can afford private medical care rather than having to rely on clinics or emergency rooms. An added level comes with being married to a physician. When Bob was in medical school and for some years thereafter, physicians extended "professional courtesy" to us, meaning they did not bill us for their services. When I need to see a specialist, Bob can recommend someone who is highly qualified and experienced. This is often a colleague of his, who treats me as a social and intellectual equal.

The compounding of privilege has continued in the lives of my children. The following account was co-written with my son, Daniel.

**Daniel Holzman-Tweed (1968 - )**

When Dan was born, his grandparents bought savings bonds in his name and opened custodial savings accounts that would become his at the age of 18.

**Education.** We knew when he was a baby that Dan was hyperactive, and as he got older it became apparent that he also had an attention deficit disorder. We were able to afford a private school that could accommodate his needs in a way that an overcrowded public school classroom had demonstrated that it could not. No one at the Garden School ever suggested that we medicate him to make him more manageable. When specific problems arose, his teachers always received my input respectfully and worked with me to find a solution. When Dan was in junior high school, long before personal computers became ubiquitous, we acquired a home computer and taught Dan to use it for book reports and term papers. For a child who struggled with handwriting and spelling, and who frequently dropped out words or sentences when he tried to copy from his rough draft to a final draft, the effect of access to a computer was magical. Without access to this resource, it is doubtful that his academic achievement would have matched his full potential.

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After high school Dan enrolled in Antioch College, a cooperative school in which students alternate between terms spent on campus and terms spent working for companies or organizations that may be located anywhere in the country. While on campus, most of them support themselves by participating in the school's Work Study Program. Since we were able to pay Dan's tuition and expenses, he did not have to take out any student loans or work during his on-campus terms. As a result, he was able to graduate in four years, while most students took five or more years to complete their coursework. He was also able to accept co-op jobs anywhere in the country regardless of the cost of traveling to them and regardless of whether they paid enough for him to live on. One of his co-op jobs was at a physics research facility he was told about by a childhood friend, a physicist. This job led directly to his first job after graduation.

**Relationship with police.** As a white teenager, Dan had a privileged relationship with the police. With his hair long and dressed in denim and black leather, he roamed the streets of New York City with his friends late at night without ever being stopped and hassled by the police. We worried about him, but never because we feared he would be killed during a stop-and-frisk. Later, when he was working and living in Palo Alto, California, the police stopped him in the street because he matched the description of someone wanted for armed bank robbery. They treated him with respect and courtesy. (Dan has written at length about this incident in a blog) (Holzman-Tweed, 2012).

**Employment.** When Dan was too old for summer camp, his computer skills qualified him for a job as a computer counselor at the summer camp operated by his high school. Another summer a cousin who was a state assemblyman helped him to get a volunteer job working for the re-election campaign of the Manhattan District Attorney. A few years later his father got him a paid summer job at Bellevue Hospital as the database administrator for their AIDS Program. From that time on, all of his jobs were based on his work experience with computers.

After graduation from college, Dan was hired by a prestigious physics laboratory in Chicago, a position for which his friend the physicist recommended him to the hiring manager. A year later, their budget was cut drastically and as one of the last hired, he was one of the first fired. During the period of unemployment that followed, he was able to use the funds his grandparents had provided to pay his bills for a while. When those funds were exhausted, his parents and grandparents were able to provide further financial assistance with no impact on their own standard of living. He was also able to support himself for a time through consulting jobs obtained through friends from college. After ten months he was hired by a medical billing firm, doing software development and systems administration. His next two jobs involved doing computer security for investment firms.

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Dan's next employers subsidized part of the cost of his professional certifications and graduate education, and both his CISSP (Certified Information Security Systems Professional) certification and his master's degree in Information Security were factors in decisions to hire him into higher-ranked and higher-paying positions even during the Great Recession. His experience at Bellevue Hospital, his experience at a medical billing firm, and his father's status as a physician were factors in the decision to hire him at his current managerial job with a major health care system. They were also a factor in his ability to transition from a finance-oriented culture to a healthcare-oriented culture and in his credibility with physicians as someone with the authority to require them to change their behavior with regard to computer security even though he is not a physician.

**Housing.** When Dan bought a house, his parents were able to contribute towards the down payment. When he had to sell the house at a net loss as part of a divorce settlement, his parents were able to cover the closing costs and pay the moving expenses for his return to New York. Since his grandfather had been admitted to a long-term-care facility, he was able to live rent-free in his grandfather's apartment while job hunting. When his grandfather died, he inherited the apartment, becoming the third generation of the family to pay the subsidized rent, and completely bypassing the years-long waiting list.

**Medical care.** Because Dan works for a healthcare organization, he has excellent health insurance. The physicians who provide his health care are the chiefs and directors of their departments. Some of them are also former students of his father. He is able to evaluate their recommendations and sometimes dispute them based on the published literature in the field – which he has access to because his father has an internet-based Medline account. When cancer treatments rendered him unable to work for four months, his employers accommodated him and made certain he could continue in his job.

Looking back over my family's story, there are several things that stand out for me. One is how different forms of privilege reinforced one another or morphed into one another. Being white led to stable, well-paid employment, which allowed saving, which eventually built wealth. Having savings allowed my parents to buy into cooperative housing. Where we lived determined what school I went to, which affected the quality of the education I got. Even before we had accumulated wealth, just having a little more than enough made it possible to take advantage of opportunities that required a cash outlay up front. Having a surplus also meant not having to borrow money at high interest rates, which meant more money for other purposes.

Race and class privilege meant that our social circle included people who could be helpful to us in a variety of ways, including tutoring, access to employment opportunities, and volunteer opportunities that were stepping-stones

to career advancement. Growing up in a white, middle-class environment also meant that white, middle-class speech, attire, and behavior became second nature to us. Potential employers felt comfortable with us and evaluated us positively because they perceived us as like them. We could “just be ourselves”, which was a boost to our self-confidence and did not force us to choose between being true to ourselves and our community and being successful in a white, middle-class environment.

Also striking is how often standardized tests played an important part in opening up opportunities for us, such as civil service jobs or placement in a special progress class or an elite high school or college. On the surface, these tests were supposed to eliminate favoritism and provide an equal opportunity for all. In reality, however, they are strongly biased in favor of people who have had middle or upper class life experiences.

### **Toward Sustainable Personal, Interpersonal, and Institutional Change**

I have found that an intellectual understanding of systems of power and privilege and my place within them is not enough to enable me to make the lasting and thoroughgoing changes in my thoughts and behavior that I seek or to have the impact I want to have on the people and institutions I interact with. For that I need to be emotionally as well as intellectually engaged and to have the ongoing support of a community of practice that shares my goals and values. I have found that community in an organization called Be Present, Inc., a diverse national network whose mission is developing and supporting sustainable collective leadership for social justice.<sup>2</sup>

Be Present provides a variety of settings in which I have had an opportunity to examine my role in perpetuating racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression and privilege. My self-examination takes place among a diverse group of people who are engaging in the same process. We learn and practice a specific set of skills for expanding self-awareness, identifying and modifying unproductive behavior patterns, and clarifying personal goals and values. Attention to one’s emotional experience in the present moment is a central part of the process. In this supportive setting, I am able to bring into awareness attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs that are the cumulative result of a lifetime of privilege. I become aware of implicit biases (Banaji, 2013) and learn to correct for them. I identify expectations that are based on a sense of entitlement that I was unaware of because it had never been questioned before. I open myself to information about myself that may at first be uncomfortable to know. I learn to take in that information and to respond to it

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<sup>2</sup> More information about Be Present, Inc. can be found at [www.bepresent.org](http://www.bepresent.org). The next three paragraphs draw on information on the website and in various Be Present, Inc. brochures and proposals.

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without defensiveness. I have learned that my criteria for “correct grammar,” “good manners,” “appropriate attire” etc. are often just the ones that I was taught in my white, middle-class family, and that there are other criteria that are equally valid.

In addition to learning skills for self-examination, I learn and practice listening supportively to the other participants. As I learn more about their lives, it becomes impossible to hold on to the stereotypes I have learned, because I have first-hand knowledge of people the stereotypes just don’t fit. Similarly, it has become impossible for me to believe in the myth that the United States is a meritocracy in which anyone who is intelligent and hard-working can be economically successful. I have met too many people who possess those qualities but who struggle financially because they have been systematically denied equal opportunity.

In formats that extend beyond a single workshop, Be Present builds in opportunities for the participants to work together in a collaborative leadership process to plan and execute a variety of tasks. These are not invented exercises, but activities that are necessary to accomplish the goals of the group. Participating in these activities, I have become aware of attitudes and behaviors that I was taught as part of my education as a bearer of privilege. I had an unwarranted conviction that my way of doing things was the right way. I was generally confident that I had a valuable contribution to make to the discussion, and advocated vigorously for my preferred plan of action. I became impatient when the group spent time exploring other options. When I began to talk less and listen more, I noticed some interesting things. One was that frequently someone else said what I had been planning to say. This led me to question why it had seemed so urgent that I be the one to say it. Another observation was that often someone else made a point that I had not thought of, because they saw things from a different perspective. When everyone’s priorities and contributions were fully heard, it was usually possible to arrive at a consensus that addressed everyone’s needs.

In collaborative relationships with people who don’t share my privilege, I am becoming less worried about doing or saying the “wrong thing” and more able to be authentic and open with them. I am more able to empathize with them, to see things from their perspective, to learn from them, and to respect their leadership. As a result, we are able to form partnerships based on trust and mutual understanding so that we can work collaboratively toward shared goals.

Familiarity with my own privilege-based beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors helps me to recognize them in others who share my privilege. To the extent that I have forgiven myself for not yet having completely eradicated them, I am better able to respond compassionately when others reveal theirs. I look for ways to provide information or feedback in ways that don’t add to their shame or defensiveness, because I want them to be able to take in what I’m saying.

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The changes I have been able to make in my privilege-based attitudes and behavior, in how I build relationships with others, and in how I participate in collaborative leadership are directly transferable to changing unjust social structures and institutions. Systems of power and privilege are constructed, maintained, and modified by the actions of human beings (Johnson, 2006; Kivel, 1996). If I know how a situation is biased in my favor, I have choices about how I participate in it. I can choose not to take advantage of it for my own benefit. I can share my resources with others. I can use my privilege to advocate for someone who is being treated unfairly. I can collaborate with others who, like me, are committed to social change. I do not imagine that I have made all the changes in myself that I need to make, or that social justice will be easily attained. I look forward to whatever comes next.

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