



LET'S TALK equality

Starting a Conversation about Privilege

by Kelsey M.

Privilege has never been a subject that people feel comfortable talking about. This discomfort is understandable because in order to engage in the conversation, you have to acknowledge that you benefit from some sort of privilege that others are denied. This is an incredibly daunting task, especially for someone who has been given a whole lot of privilege. People with privilege are so afraid to acknowledge their advantages because they are afraid to lose it. And who wouldn't be? If you were dealt all the right cards you would most certainly protest a reshuffle. Arguments of 'I don't control the cards' or 'It's the luck of the draw' would definitely be muttered. But the cards are stacked. Life is played with an unfair deck that benefits the rich, white, straight man. That is why a conversation about privilege is so necessary, and I feel ready to contribute.

As a child, it took a while for me to realize that everyone wasn't just like me. Not everyone went home to a very large house where they were greeted by their two moms and a plateful of snacks, but that was my life. For me, it was normal that I had two moms, a huge house, and twenty-eight acres to run around in. But I grew up, as every child does, looked back, and realized that my life wasn't a normal life. Although I knew that my life had certain advantages, I was also aware that it had disadvantages. I had friends who weren't allowed to come over to my house because their parents knew that my parents were lesbians. At recess, the boys wouldn't let me play basketball with them because I was a girl. Even as a small child, I knew this wasn't right and I stood up against it every chance that I could. I stopped talking to friends that didn't like that my parents were gay. I outran, out-jumped, and outsmarted the boys every chance I got. But that didn't make the problem go away. I didn't know it then, but this was privilege working against me.

Although I have known for some time that I have privileges working against me, it wasn't until reading Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack" and discussing it in class that I realized how many privileges I have working in my favor. In her essay, McIntosh takes a good look at all the privilege she has and finds that even something as small as having Band-Aid's match her skin tone is a privilege. This really inspired me to take a close look at my life and find all the small privileges that I enjoy without even realizing it. Obviously, I knew that my white skin and well-off parents were privileges that I had, but I have a lot more privilege than just that. I am healthy, able-bodied, educated, I live in one of the most affluent nations in the world, and I had never even thought about these things as real privileges. I didn't appreciate the fact that I can wake up, eat breakfast, go to college, and come back to a home that has food to eat and people that care about me. There are so many people in the world that can't say the same and when you acknowledge that, it really puts your life in perspective and makes you realize why we really need to be having a conversation about privilege.

What we don't need in this conversation about privilege is people being shamed and ridiculed for having or not having privilege. This can be a difficult idea for some people to understand. A person who was born with little privilege had no control over that and the same goes for someone who was born into a lot of privilege. Someone who was simply born privileged does not deserve to be harassed for it and I find it crazy to believe that this actually happens and even crazier that this happened to me. It was my senior year of high school in my government class and we were discussing sexism in America. I spoke up and voiced my opinion of how ridiculous and unfair it is that I am still not seen as being equal to a man in the eyes of society just because I am a woman. My teacher then rolled his eyes and fired back: "Oh yes how difficult that must be for a rich white teenage girl like yourself." I was so taken aback I couldn't even respond. I was just told to check my privilege by my white male teacher who is basically the definition of privilege in America, and all because I had the audacity to give my opinion on gender inequality. Yes, I am aware that I am privileged, but that doesn't mean that I am not allowed a voice in the fight against inequality. That's what my government teacher didn't understand. You can have all the privilege in the world, but that doesn't mean that you can't engage in a conversation about how unfair privilege is, and it doesn't mean that you can't take steps to try and stop the cycle of privilege and fight for equality.

Privilege has been a constant in our society since the beginning, but it doesn't need to be anymore. Being able to candidly discuss the topic of privilege in this class has really opened my eyes to see how much better things could get if we just talked about it. Yes, talking about privilege can be uncomfortable, but that's exactly why we need to be discussing it. Because there is no way that we can solve the problem if we can't even start the conversation. If I feel so much more open and aware just from a small class discussion, imagine what could happen on a global scale. Things could really change. We have already come so far in the fight for equality, especially in the past few decades, but we still have a ways to go. And in order to get there we need to accept our privilege, acknowledge it, and then commit to doing something about it. That's how we will change the world.

Let's Talk Equality is an initiative by a group of University of Tampa professors to engage students in conversations about privilege, bias and social justice. For more information, visit www.letstalkequality.com or on Twitter @ltequality.