



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**What's Fair? Who Decides?  
The Ethics of Privilege & Oppression  
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Last spring, our UUCF Dismantling Racism Team asked if I would consider teaching a course on dismantling racism. As I reflected on what curriculum might be most helpful, I chose an anthology titled **Privilege: A Reader**. What appealed most to me was that the book went beyond reflections on white privilege and male privilege to include a more nuanced, intersectional perspective.

The term **intersectionality** suggests an analogy of an intersection in which traffic is coming from many different directions at once. From this viewpoint, any full accounting of privilege and oppression in our society should at minimum include the complex historical and cultural reasons that gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, and religion all interact to affect individuals and groups in our society differently, because these complex intersections profoundly affect how any given individual or group experiences the world, and shapes their resulting worldview.

I titled the class “What’s Fair? Who Decides?” because the word “Privilege” can sometimes be unclear. Part of what it means is “*Unearned Privilege*,” especially when that privilege is experienced as earned — such as when someone is “Born on third base and thinks they hit a triple.” A related insight I had from reading this book is that, if you imagine a Venn diagram, often **what is meant by the term “privilege” is at the intersection of the words *entitlement, advantage, and privilege* (36).**

For now, as we reflect on the interaction of privilege and oppression in the world, I invite you to consider one sociologist's description of what it might look like to have all the privileges and none of the oppressions:

In an important sense **there is only one complete unblushing male in America:** a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, college educated, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a *recent* record in sport.... **Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself — during moments at least — as unworthy, incomplete and inferior.** (x)

When I first read that description, the part that struck me most was “a *recent* record in sports.” I think of the strain I have seen people go through to buttress their self-worth through attempting to constantly maintain a *recent* record in sports even as their bodies change with each passing year. (Not that there's anything with seeking lifelong achievement in sports. Rather, the invitation is to increasingly experience that you have inherent worth and dignity as a human being irrespective of athletics.) Similarly, consider the lengths some people go to make sure no one questions their heterosexuality, or to stay thin. **So many of those privileges of the so-called “one complete unblushing male in America” are precarious and can be lost at any moment from a turn in fortune or an unexpected accident.**

One of the insights I gained from teaching this course on privilege is to notice in a more precise way than I had previously, that for most of us is **it much easier to recognize the ways we are *oppressed* than to notice the ways we are privileged** (4). Imagine you are swimming in the ocean. If you are swimming *with* the current, you can end up moving quite swiftly down the shoreline with little effort. Conversely, if you are swimming *against* a strong current, it can be an extreme struggle to advance at all — or you may even end up moving backward despite your best efforts. (If you prefer a technological metaphor, think of the difference between playing a video game on the “easy” setting compared to the “expert” setting.)

During my childhood in South Carolina, there were many ways in which I was oblivious to my male privilege, white privilege, heterosexual privilege, and Christian privilege — all of which made my life *easier* than if I had been female, a person of color, gay, or non-Christian —

because **those were some of the ways that I was swimming *with* the current of the dominant culture**. In contrast, I was very aware of all the ways in which some of my classmates had more (and more expensive) clothes, holiday/birthday presents, and family trips — making me aware of the relative differences in our class privilege. I was also aware of the ways that jocks in high school accrued privileges from relatively greater athleticism, advantages that were unreachable to me. Genetically, I wasn't cut out to compete on the football field — and it's usually not until college or graduate school that you get the “Revenge of the Nerds.”

Again, the point is that it is much easier to recognize the ways we are *oppressed* than to notice the ways we are privileged. I needed time and empathy to increasingly recognize the intersectional ways that gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, and religion impacted me and others in vastly different ways.

The same dynamic that makes privilege less noticeable to those who have it makes racism, for example, *less noticeable* to white people, who tend to have less experience being pulled over for “driving while black” or “driving while brown.” It makes heterosexism *less noticeable* to those who have never had to worry about being harassed or harmed for expressing their feelings for someone of the same sex. It makes ableism *less noticeable* for those who have rarely or never had to worry about whether lack of accommodations might make visiting a friend or place of business impossible or extremely difficult.

Looking back on my education, I realized in retrospect that when a class was taught from a historically-oppressed perspective, it had a qualifier in the title, like “African-American Social Ethics” or “Latina-Feminist Theology.” But there was no truth in advertising in some of the allegedly generic courses I took in “ethics” or “theology” which would **more accurately have been called “White Heterosexual Male Theology” or “White Heterosexual Male Ethics”** — because we were studying mostly the perspectives of white heterosexual men (3). When white, wealthy, heterosexual males are assumed to be the unqualified norm, then either consciously or unconsciously, everyone else can be experienced as deviating from that supposed norm.

One of the first major aha moments I had in recognizing historical bias was reading **Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, which tells “America's story from the point of view — and in the words of — America's women, factory workers, African**

**Americans, American Indians, working poor, and immigrant laborers.”** I recommend that book highly.

A second aha moment many years ago was reading one of the essays included in the Privilege anthology we read this fall: **“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh**. If you don’t have time to read the whole book, that essay is a powerful place to start. The most moving and memorable part of her essay is a long list of examples of White Privilege that are more difficult for white people to notice and much easier for people of color to notice. I’ll share just a few of them for now. She writes, from the perspective of a white person, that:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- 3. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.**
4. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
5. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
- 6. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.**
7. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
8. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

9. **I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.**

10. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.

One of the important parts of the book we studied on privilege is that there are many other essays inspired by McIntosh’s essay that help readers begin to also better notice the implications of ableism, Christian privilege, and more.

When presented with lists such as these about privilege and oppression, one of the dynamics that often happens is that people tend to be *more willing* to grant the ways that other people are disadvantaged, but *less willing* to grant the ways that they are overprivileged (28). **And a pitfall can be stumbling into what is sometimes called the “Oppression Olympics” in which individuals and groups compete amongst themselves about who is more oppressed.** And the major paradigm shift is coming to understand that, **“The loss of (unearned) privilege is *not* the same as reverse discrimination.”**

A related challenge is coming to understand that these oppressions operate at a social, structural, and institutional level (2). So, on one hand, yes, it matters whether any given individual is sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist, ableist, etc. On the other hand, **irrespective of any individual’s views, there are ways in which the laws, culture, and history of our society are biased toward rich, white, heterosexual, able-bodied Christian men.** And in the words of the UU activist Chris Crass, who will be speaking in D.C. in March, those interlocking systems of oppression must be *dismantled* to build up a genuine “democracy with economic, gender, and racial justice for all” — “a world where the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interconnection of life are at the heart of our cultures, institutions, and policies.”

To be honest, there are many ways in which I have benefited from the current dominance of the White Supremacist, Capitalist Patriarchy. But there are also ways in which that same dominant culture has harmed me and other men in conscious and unconscious ways. (I explored that dynamic at length in a sermon earlier this fall on **toxic masculinity**.) Relatedly if you remember my recent sermon about the racial justice activist Anne Braden, looking back on her long life, she said:

Often people say to me nowadays, “Oh, you gave up so much,” referring to the fact that I left a life of privilege and became an outcast. But I think I was lucky because **I was able to escape from the prisons I’d grown up in and join the human race.** What more can you ask of life than that? (336)

Within our various spheres of influence, may we each do our part to advance the movement toward collective liberation in which we all get free.

At least for me, the *more* I have learned about intersectionality and collective liberation, the *less* guilt and shame I felt, during discussions of privilege and oppression. And increasingly, I have come to see that **the point is not to make anyone feel miserable. Rather, the point is to make increasing numbers of us more *conscious* of the unfair entitlements, advantages, and privileges in our society** and of the need to level the playing field (xi).

Within our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism, one recent step toward dismantling white privilege, leveling the playing field, and building up multiculturalism is that last month the **UUA Board of Trustees committed \$5 million to “expand the role and visibility of black UUs.”** There will be a meeting in early March of the Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective to discern the initial ways these funds might be used.

There are important historic resonances to that amount of money. In 1968, the UU General Assembly committed \$1 million to the Black Affairs Council, to be paid over four years. But due to a confluence of circumstances, only half of the money was ever paid out, culminating in protests and walkouts at the next two General Assemblies. This series of events in our history is known alternatively as the “Black Empowerment Controversy” or the “*White Power Controversy*,” depending on whom you are talking to.

Relatedly, one of the best books I have read about why we need to level the playing field is John Rawls’s A Theory of Justice. One of his core ideas is a thought experiment in which you **imagine yourself in a hypothetical pre-birth “original position” in which you are behind a “veil of ignorance” regarding the advantages and disadvantages with which you will be born.** Behind this imagined veil, you do not know the gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, and religion of yourself or your loved ones. And from behind this “veil of ignorance,” you must choose “the principles of justice” that would structure the society you would live in.

**Rawls assumes that most people in such a position would choose to structure society in such a way that even the most vulnerable among us would have their basic needs met.** Rawls's theory of justice challenges us to fight for the same accommodation and dignity for others that we would want if we or our loved ones were in their situation.

We remain divided in many ways as a nation. But one path forward is to help one another become more conscious of how the *intersection* of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, religion cuts through individuals, families, and groups in this country in so many multifaceted ways. I'm increasingly convinced that **neither race-first, nor class-first, nor gender-first approaches will work. We need to move beyond competing oppressions to *coalitions working together* for collective liberation.**

As we seek to build bridges across differences, one of my touchstones for navigating the ethics of privilege and oppression is to be attentive to the difference between "calling someone *out*" and "calling them *in*." As one becomes more conscious of privilege and oppression, it can be tempting to call people *out* for being sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist, ableist, or Christian supremacist. Instead of calling people *out* — which can be shaming and distancing, leaving people feeling more divided — I've been heartened recently to witness people calling one another *in* to deeper, more authentic relationship. **Calling someone "in" still involves naming hard truths about privilege and oppression, but it emerges from the heart and is shaped by the spirit of love and compassion.** It is done in the spirit of saying, "I really care about you and our relationship, and because I care, I want to take the risk of being honest with you about something that you said or did that hurt me, which may or may not have been your intention." The difference between *brutal* honesty and speaking the truth *in love* is all the difference in the world.