

One Person's Experience of White Privilege

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By Rev. Maylanne Maybee

Rev. Maylanne Maybee is a White, Anglican deacon who has been an educator and activist in community and social justice ministry. She served on the staff of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada for more than 14 years, first in Mission and Justice Education, then as coordinator of Ecojustice Networks. She is currently Principal of the Centre for Christian Studies, based in Winnipeg, an Anglican and United Church school for diaconal ministry with a focus on education, social ministry and pastoral care.

My whole childhood was one of White privilege, though I had no awareness of it in the moment. My father was a diplomat who, over his career, served in Canada and overseas in China, Australia, the U.S., Lebanon and India. I lived in all these places except India which I visited while a university student. I was often aware of others' deference toward me, to varying degrees depending on what country we were in, but had no name to give it. I felt awkward, embarrassed and unable to change my relationship with others – at school and in other social situations, especially those in the street or marketplace.

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I especially remember being driven through New Delhi in an embassy car. While waiting at a corner, a small boy put his battered tin bowl through the window asking for money. The driver put an end to it by closing the window with the automatic button.

This sense of unequal relationships fired my pursuit in adulthood for social justice, my desire to be engaged in social ministry, my sense of righteous

indignation. It therefore confounded and hurt me deeply when, as chair of a non-profit society whose purpose was to create housing for people facing homelessness, I was confronted by a spokesperson for a consulting group on racism. She pointed out my privilege and the exclusive, high-handed style of governance for which I was responsible. My reaction was anger, guilt and self-justification, mingled with compunction and shame.

Some years later, when my position as a church professional required me to be more engaged in anti-racism work, I was reluctant to get involved and hid behind the shelter of not being trained or skilled or expert. Better leave that work to those with the right training.

When staff reductions changed my work responsibilities, I still hid behind other roles: I was the “secretary,” the one who organized meetings, recorded decisions, ensured facilitation. But I was not an actor! Leadership and

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But it was impossible to stay distant. I read about White privilege until my eyes were opened, but it was the words and teachings of those who suffered racism that really opened my ears. The voice of one member of our group was brilliant and analytical and persistent and angry. I could not ignore his experience nor what he was saying. The other was a voice of friendship and teaching, but the teaching was hard. It wasn't what I wanted to hear. It didn't affirm me in my journey. A third voice was baffled when I expressed the hurt and guilt that accompanied my awareness of privilege – that's your problem, not mine.

What I have found on the journey is that it's difficult; it's one I would rather not undertake. It has alienated me from some people who just won't talk about privilege, or who block the work with passive or aggressive resistance, or who plead for the message to be gentler. It has alienated me from other people who cannot or will not offer friendship; who insist that the failure of those who are privileged is intentional and conscious. In such moments, I long to be among “my own” – others who are White and privileged and refuse to be convicted or made to feel guilty.

But becoming a trainer in anti-racism has changed me. Leading people over and over again in the “Race to the Wall” exercise, an exercise that reveals the hidden elements of privilege and lack of it – has consistently resulted in “ah-hah” moments for some participants. Sitting and working side by side with people who have been “racialized” – regarded as lesser because of their colour and culture and accent – has changed me. Reflecting with others who enjoy White privilege on what forces are at work to benefit us has changed me. We can count on our social networks, on connections built by our parents, on the automatic trust extended to people of European descent, on the ease of speaking and listening without the strain of trying to understand or be understood.

There is injustice here, there are barriers between people. It is sinful; it is not God’s will.

Friendship is what sustains me: friendship with unlike people who expand my horizons, change my worldview, and open up big spaces inside me that I didn’t know were there. Feeling my humanity is what sustains me. Knowing that I am part of the human race gives a far deeper sense of belonging than anything associated with class or country or language. Experiencing the incarnation sustains me – for I have come to understand that when God became flesh, God crossed the ultimate cultural boundary and joined the human race, of which there is only one. Thank God.

A prayer

Gracious God, you made us in your own image.
Give us eyes to see and hearts to imagine
who you are in your very essence
so that you may be fully visible to us
in the eyes and hearts of all your children;
for you made them and they are, indeed, very good.
Amen.