

Hanging Up on White Privilege

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By Rev. Steve Willey

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Every once in a while I hear myself say something so idiotic I offend even myself. In the awkwardness of teenaged dating, thinking I was being romantic, I once told a young woman that she looked beautiful in the dark. I'm sure I cringed before she did. On the bus ride home that night, I started a new mental list: "Things not to say to keep a first date from becoming a last date." I have long forgiven my youthful self. Every young man goes through a stage of being naïve in the ways of love and clumsy in the presence of a person who is simultaneously utterly alluring and alarmingly "other."

In the years that followed, I did my best to be a male ally to the feminist movement of the 1970s and '80s. The lessons I learned from that experience helped me be a better ally to gay, lesbian and bi-sexual friends and colleagues in their struggle for full recognition within the United Church of Canada. Through Liberation Theology, I learned of Christ's alliance with the poor and sought to follow him as the Way. One special passage from Christian scripture guided me during those years of learning to be an ally:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in human form. (Philippians 2: 5-7)*

Lesson one in being an affluent, straight male ally: refuse to be enchanted by the power and entitlement that society offers you as if it is your divine right. Lesson two: with the support of community, discern when and how to use your power and privilege in loving service to the marginalized and their social movements. Lesson three: lean into the conviction that therein lies your full humanity. I thought I had learned these lessons well. And then came the phone call.

Returning to my church office one day, I found a message from a woman who had seen our building and wanted to talk about the possibility of attending our congregation. I called her back. She wasn't home. Her invitation to leave a message started with some make-you-want-to-get-up-

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and-dance Latin music followed by instructions in Spanish. Not being able to speak Spanish, I waited for the universal beep as my cue to tell her how to re-connect with me when she got home. About an hour later my phone rang. After telling her a bit about the

congregation, I asked her to tell me a little about herself. She had two children and had been in the country for almost five years. Thinking I would establish some rapport, I said, "So you must almost feel like a Canadian by now!" There was a three-heartbeat pause before she replied, "I *am* a Canadian." Then she hung up on me and my church.

Every once in a while I hear myself say something so idiotic I offend even myself. But this time was different; and it felt less easily forgivable. I was not young. I was not inexperienced. I was not clumsy in social situations. I took the message of her hanging up on me as a forceful statement that I had no excuse. I knew in that moment she was right, though it took me several years to understand just how right she had been. In the spirit of Philippians 2, I had deeply examined my male privilege, my class privilege, and my heterosexist privilege but had been blind to my White privilege.

That was almost 20 years ago. I remain grateful to that woman for hanging up on my racist assumptions about people who listen to a certain kind of

music and who live in a language other than English. She hung up on my narrow notion of what it means to be Canadian and what it takes to claim belonging. She hung up on my attempt to define both her person and her experience. In short, she slammed the phone in the ear of my White privilege.

Unlike the time when I told a girl that she looked beautiful in the dark, this was not a moment of minor embarrassment. It was a moment of life-altering conversion. When she fiercely laid claim to her full personhood, she laid bare my moral and spiritual blindness. She was the voice from the margins telling me something transformative: that I could not be her genuine friend, her safe Christian brother or her ally until I opened my heart to the social sin of my own White privilege.

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I have done my best in the intervening years not to waste that precious encounter. When I say something idiotic now I try not to regard it as a demoralizing sign of failure but as a hopeful indication that my commitments are still calling me to grow beyond myself. As long as there is a need to keep growing I will tell of the strong woman with the phone message playing music-that-makes-you-want-to-get-up-and-dance; how she hung up on me, and made me more whole.