White Privilege

White privilege, the idea that white people benefit from unearned and largely unacknowledged advantages, came into the national vernacular when Peggy McIntosh, a scholar at Wellesley College, began writing about it in 1988. Her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” began a discussion that has extended over the years to an examination of gender, able-bodied, heterosexual, and other kinds of privilege. There is even a BuzzFeed quiz on “Privilege” that can be found at http://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you#.cxrxDKNGX

All this began when McIntosh asked herself the question, “On a daily basis, what do I have that I didn’t earn?” The first advantage that came to mind was, “I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.” Diving into this question more deeply, she developed twenty-six statements of privilege. A few of them include:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

- I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
• I can speak in public to a powerful group without putting my race on trial.

• 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.

• I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

Twenty-seven years after McIntosh wrote “The Invisible Knapsack” some continue to think that there is no difference between their experience and the experience of a person of color, that racism will go away if we stop talking about it, or that racism no longer exists. Talking about race makes us very uncomfortable in this society.

Why do we do it? Maybe we feel that we are being blamed for the suffering of others or that it isn’t our fault that we are not subjected to these stereotypes. If you benefit from white privilege, it is not because you asked for it and it is not because you did something to deserve it so you are not to blame unless you choose to become part of the problem. McIntosh’s essay asks us to think about the privileges that should be the birthright of every human and a recognition that systemic issues of inequality still exist. Consider how we as a community may challenge our discomfort to raise issues of racism and discrimination and come together around them.

Toward the end of McIntosh’s essay, she writes:

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. . . . My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms.

To find more information on white privilege and its presence today, please see some reliable sources following this article.
McIntosh, Peggy. "How Studying Privilege Systems Can Strengthen Compassion": Peggy McIntosh at TEDxTimberlaneSchools.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-BY9UEewHw

McIntosh, Peggy. *Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity: The National Seed Project on Inclusive Curriculum.*

http://www.nationalseedproject.org/59-seed-directors/18-peggy-mcintosh

McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

http://www.uakron.edu/dotAsset/1662103.pdf

Van Der Valk, Adrienne. “Peggy Mcintosh: Beyond the Knapsack” in *Teaching Tolerance.*