

White Privilege, Fragility and Vulnerability by Liliana Delman

When talking about whiteness, privilege, and vulnerability, I like to get some things clear right at the start. 1) I am white, I have white privilege, and I benefit from white supremacy, 2) white privilege is not a moral condemnation of white people, it is the reality of a system that none of us started, but one that for everyone operates either to our benefit or detriment, 3) to be vulnerable is to show your strength, not weakness, and 4) there are many kinds of privilege, and right now I'm talking about white privilege.

When talking about white privilege, it's important to talk about white fragility, too. With all of the protections and privileges that come with whiteness, the insecurities and fear around addressing race and racism is extreme. The fear of being labeled a racist or being rejected by the other "good white people" oftentimes leads to white folks removing themselves from any uncomfortable conversation about race. The need to avoid that feeling of messing up, saying the wrong thing, or exposing your privilege is so ingrained, especially at institutions of higher learning, that we aren't able to get very far in the dialogue before white fragility shows up in full force. I see that fragility in myself, even as I work to move past it, grow and continue learning.

I am the only white staff member in my office and I mess up every day. There are days when I think I'm doing better, and then I inevitably speak from my white privilege, talk over a colleague, or expose my thoughtlessness around a situation infused with racism. So much of whiteness is being comfortable, having systems structured for your success, and gaining access to opportunities. Part of the journey to recognize my part in the system of racism has been acknowledging white privilege limits my ability to be uncomfortable, honest, or open-hearted.

Owning, exposing, and pushing against the unearned privileges that come along with whiteness means that I have to teach myself to better recognize when white privilege is at work. Claiming to reject white supremacy and work towards anti-racism while avoiding examining your own contributions to the system of racism, that's white privilege. Laughing about the last thing Donald Trump said, and then remarking that if elected, you'll "just move to Canada", that's white privilege. Joining a discussion about race and then spending most of the time dominating the space with your thoughts and feelings, that's white privilege.

So, if white privilege is something you're born with, and white supremacy is a larger system that we live in, then what can we do? Listen more. Be curious and teach yourself. Reflect on your quick reactions, insecurity, and defensiveness. When you feel like stepping away, take a breath and re-engage. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It's a vulnerable process. When I get nervous about being vulnerable, I like to remember this quote from author Brené Brown: "Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness." Feeling uncomfortable is awkward, but this work is not about a whiteness pity party, it's about systemic change that starts on the individual and interpersonal level.