

My privilege

14 June, 2020

A lot of talk going around about now concerning White Privilege. A lot of talk that's been whispered behind cupped hands for decades and now is finally becoming part of the audible national conversation. This conversation is of course overdue but as promised when I opened up this website, I'm not going to delve into the political and cultural morass that has become so common these days, in which someone proffers what they consider a well-reasoned and carefully stated opinion or observation, only to come under attack by the slogan-chanting, logic-eschewing, impolite and impertinent diatribes of their less considerate and more reactive fellows. (Whew! That was a long sentence; must have come from bottled up angst, you think?)

I can't speak to White Privilege in upper case because I just haven't done the research that would qualify me to do so thoughtfully. But I can speak in lower case to *my* privilege, the aspects of my life that have led to me being better off than might have been the case had I not been of Irish-German-Danish lineage, living in this country, at this time.

I was born in a clean hospital room to a mother who'd had the benefits of a healthful diet, clean surroundings and access to health care during her pregnancy. The fact that she had polio had nothing to do with race, so it's moot in this context.

My father had a job that provided amply, if not grandly, for five children and my mother had access to running, potable water, in-house sanitation and books – the books she would teach each and all of her children to love.

I attended a parochial school through eighth grade that provided a stellar primary education. To be fair, yes, there were black kids in our school. All three of them out of a student population in the hundreds. (I wish I could go back and tell Debra Loving what an impression she made on my young, self-absorbed life. I believe I recall she took a lot of ribbing based on her race that we considered good natured and she could only have seen as hurtful. Damn.)

Speaking of my parochial education, it probably prepared me better academically than the local public school might have. And it certainly gave me a full lap head start on kids whose educational journeys began in the 'separate but equal' learning venues provided to black children in many areas of this country at the time. Yes, I know by that time *Brown* et al had overturned *Plessy* et al, but if you think the world changed magically in 1954, please read some history.

In the Navy, I was a nuclear power plant operator after passing through some of the academically toughest training one can imagine. Judging by epidermal hue, the sailors in my division and department aboard ship were almost entirely of European ancestry. Some folks might take that as evidence of superior intelligence of white sailors. I believe it had more to do with the combination of better academic preparation and the perception of non-whites by the recruiters and job-assigners of the time.

I can't speak to how the various managers and entrepreneurs who hired me over the years were affected by my appearance. Or whether my ancestry played directly into my being offered this opportunity or that. But I can speak to some things that never, ever happened to me:

I was never left languishing in an outer office when I had a scheduled interview.

To my knowledge, I was never subjected to increased scrutiny of my experience and references based on the assumption that my resume must be padded.

I worked late shifts a number of times but I didn't have to ride crowded buses because I always had a vehicle at my disposal to get me safely and quickly to and fro.

Speaking of late shifts, I was pulled over and put face down precisely one time out of all those late night drives home. And once I knew the description of the perpetrator they were looking for, I had to admit I was a ringer for the guy who had raped and murdered a little girl two blocks from where I was living at the time. But here's the thing - the most I experienced that night was distress and mildly sore wrists from the handcuffs. The cops checked in with my boss to confirm I could not have been in the area when the crime occurred and when they released me, I left the scene unmarked.

Covid distancing aside, no one to my knowledge has ever moved to the other side of the street at my approach.

The times when I was pulled over for traffic offenses (all well-deserved by the bye – I was a bit of a speed demon in my youth) I was never pulled out of the car, subjected to search 'for my safety' or any of the tactics that seem to have become de rigeur these days for stops involving non-white motorists.

I must acknowledge here my conviction that many cops, probably most, are fine public servants doing a dangerous and thankless job. The thing is, being pasty-skinned, I never much worried about meeting up with a cop of the less professional variety.

I will be retiring within the next year or so, having never seen the inside of a jail cell or even a police car.

I have never had to wonder upon meeting a new neighbor whether they resented my presence in 'their' neighborhood.

Sure, I came from a family that mostly earned its way. One grandfather was a sharecropper in Iowa, a great guy or so I hear who worked his butt off his whole life. Yeah, the other was a no-count (expletive deleted) who did little to enhance the prospects of my mother and her sisters and left his wife to raise five kids on her own. But both my grandmothers and my own parents worked hard for everything they brought home to us and my siblings and I were encouraged in our academic pursuits.

We didn't have expensive clothes, my parents drove their cars until they died and we ate a lo-o-o-t of very basic food. But we felt safe and encouraged. And we always had books in a house overseen by parents who were home at night because they never had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

I'd have to say I was a child of privilege.

My privilege was not so much about possessions as positioning. By the fact of that positioning I was placed down on the track an easy lap ahead of those not so randomly favored.

I'm thinking about that a lot these days.