

THE SEARCH FOR A MIDDLE GROUND

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The struggle between understanding and accepting one's own privilege and working with oppressed populations is explored through the following personal narrative. The role of privilege is debated—from childhood memories through development of a professional self—with the realization that there is no easy answer.

I have never been much of a coffee drinker, so when I found a Starbucks gift card inside a thank you card for a speaking engagement, I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with it. One chilly Colorado morning, upon learning that McDonalds no longer served hot chocolate, I remembered the Starbucks card. So I got my hot chocolate, but figured I would also bring a coffee drink home for my husband. I ordered the white chocolate mocha, liking the sound of it. As I drove home, the mocha began to drip out of the side of the cup. Knowing I had to protect my car interior, I took a sip of the drink. Never in my life had I tasted anything so wonderful and delicious. With that one taste, I was hooked.

Over the next few months, those Starbucks drinks became my reward, my comfort, and my morning encouragement. One morning while enjoying my little piece of heaven, I looked over and saw a man holding a sign that read: "Will work for food." In that moment, I had a crisis of conscience. Was I really sitting in my car drinking a four dollar cup of coffee while this man had nothing to eat? I knew I was not comfortable with this scenario, but at that moment I did not know what to do. On one hand, I work hard to earn my money and I am typically responsible with my monetary choices. Do I not deserve a treat every now and then, even if some may perceive it as excessive? On the other hand, the money I spent on this single cup of coffee could have provided a meal for this poor man. I could not resolve it, so I came up with a compromise; I would continue to buy my coffee, but I would purchase a coffee for him

as well. But then I was too worried about getting the right kind. Should I get him regular or decaf? What if he has a health condition in which he shouldn't have milk or sugar? What if he doesn't even like coffee? The whole issue became too complicated for me. So I stopped going to Starbucks and I stopped driving past that corner. Problem solved – right?

I have told my family not to write an obituary when I die, just tell this story. This scenario sums up not only the dichotomy that has become my day-to-day life, but gives an accurate picture of the struggle between what I see in the world and the kind of person I strive to be. The compromise between how I care for myself personally and what I know professionally is something I have yet to understand. How do I live my life according to my professional values, stand up for justice, fight oppression, and ensure equality for the underserved while also living comfortably, which may inadvertently contribute to the societal problems?

When the opportunity to address this issue in the *Reflections* came about, I struggled with the decision to pursue it. At first I think it was difficult because it is hard for me to acknowledge to others that I am a person of privilege. Especially when sitting with those I serve, it sometimes feels as though the ease of my life is something for which I should be ashamed. Logically, I know that I did not pick my gender, skin color, or family of origin differently than anyone else, but that does not seem to make a difference. One day as I was leaving the parking lot, a coworker made a positive comment about the car I was driving; specifically, "Wow, how much are they paying

social workers these days?" Now my car is nothing fancy, but it was new and shiny. However, rather than responding with pride or laughing at the joke, I felt ashamed. I don't deserve to be driving a nice car when my clients can barely afford bus money, and I felt as though this was something my coworker was implying. So once again, rather than addressing it, I began driving a 12-year old Honda Civic with hail damage and a leaky window. It just seemed more fitting for a social worker and saved me from having to justify myself. Just based on the emotion I felt around this one situation, could I really write a whole paper that exposes my shame and justifies my actions?

I also found myself struggling with this project because I don't know that I acknowledge that I really am person of privilege. I can pay my bills every month and have most of life's basic necessities. By choice or by chance, my life has been relatively easy and I have been able to position myself to a place in the world where I am comfortable. But maybe I only have this life and certain opportunities because I am privileged. Maybe part of my reluctance in even addressing this issue is that I don't know that I want to have to struggle; I don't want to give up the rights, luxuries, and benefits afforded to me by nature of my skin color, belief system and social standing (Haney Lopez, 1996). If I acknowledge it, then I actually have to do something about it; and I don't know that I can or that I want to. Maybe this is reason for my reluctance and likely, for my shame.

Every time I sat down to address this issue, despite the fact it is important to me, I was unable to do so. It was too overwhelming; too much work to try to understand my dual roles. So much like the Starbucks situation, I kept giving up. I thought about it for several months, yet did nothing. It was not until I heard Dave Matthews' new song, *Funny the Way It Is* (2009) that I changed my mind. This song highlights the dichotomy between contentment and struggle in our world. The song offers no judgment, no answers, and no explanation; it just puts the issue on the table. It made me realize that my narrative did not have to be a justification of my choices, an apology for my

behavior, or even an attempt to make changes. It is just a chance to share my struggle with the realization that no solution may even exist. And that possibly the solution is to simply acknowledge that happiness and sadness, privilege and poverty, hope and pain, all exist simultaneously.

This process of understanding the role of privilege has been a life long journey for me. In fact, the relationship between money and life satisfaction has been a topic present on my mind since I was a small child. As a kid, I had the opportunity to witness both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum while existing safely in the middle. I grew up in a small town where the economy had failed. Unemployment was rampant, as were many of the problems that exist when there are not enough resources to meet the needs. However, this town is also a bedroom community to an extremely wealthy resort. Million dollar "vacation homes" that sat empty much of the time, visits from celebrities, fancy restaurants, and luxury vehicles were commonplace. I was well aware of the differences between these two communities and often felt frustrated. This other community had the ability to help and support our community, but instead they took advantage of our situation. I never knew what to do to make them pay for this injustice; I was only able to feel sadness and anger at watching it happen.

On a smaller scale, I also experienced this pain personally. Heartache struck at age 8, when I was ridiculed for not having an authentic Cabbage Patch doll. I hated those mean girls, I hated my parents for not being richer, and mostly, I hated that stupid fake doll. Two years later when I finally got a *real* Cabbage Patch Doll, I realized the dolls were not that great; especially since I had never been one to play with dolls in the first place. So why had it been such a big deal at the time? Only as I write this now can I understand that it was not about the doll, it was about the social meaning that the doll represented. It was about not being included; having others look at me as different; having been told "you can't;" knowing the only way to regain my power and sense of self was through that doll and what it symbolized;

yet I did not have the means to obtain any of it.

About the same time, my parents had run into some financial problems. Again, I felt powerless. I knew the only way to “fix” my parents, my family, and to have happiness and security was to have more money. At a very young age I made it my responsibility to understand, appreciate, and desire money. That year, I sold more than double the amount of Girl Scout cookies than anyone in my troop. I set up neighborhood businesses mowing lawns and feeding pets, and began to plan how I would be a self-sufficient entrepreneur by the time I was out of high school. My brother and I frequently daydreamed about the days we would be rich and even bought each other shirts for Christmas that read, “The only thing money can’t buy is poverty” and “Anyone who says money can’t buy happiness doesn’t know where to shop.” We had the “Greed is Good” speech from the movie *Wall Street* (1987) hanging on the wall. We would insult each other by yelling out names of low-paying jobs, such as “teacher!” or “social worker!” I remember being given a homework assignment to write an essay choosing to have love, money, fame, or friendship for the rest of our lives. I was surprised to learn that I was the only one in the class who picked money. I called out the rest of the class on their foolishness and the teacher referred to me as “the little CEO” for the rest of the school year. As an impulsive adolescent, I even got a dollar sign tattoo (sad, I know, but completely true) because I thought that was a perfect symbol of my identity.

These thoughts and feelings were also reflected in the dominant discourse of society at the time, which has now led to a nation overwhelmed by personal and collective debt. The messages from television and politicians were that you work hard, *no matter what it takes*, and buy as many material possessions as possible; because the only way to measure a person’s worth was by the things you owned. So I worked hard. My family’s finances never seemed to recover to the amount I thought sufficient, but I managed my personal finances impeccably. I began working at age 14 and maintained employment all through high school,

often working two or three jobs at a time. I joined clubs, ran the student government and did everything I needed to position myself for college acceptance, which would further my dreams of wealth, respect, and of course, happiness.

But there was a hitch in my plan. I guess I should have thought better of attending a college whose motto is “Educating Men and Women in the Service of Others.” Although I knew a college education was the first step to great wealth, I was not prepared for what I would actually learn while there. The change in my life path started small, with an option for the kind-hearted and the overachieving students to earn extra credit for something called “service learning.” I would like to say I agreed to this because of some intrinsic value to help, but it was really about the extra credit and the idea I would look good in the eyes of those who really mattered. For my first project, I volunteered at a hospice for men with AIDS. I was welcomed, accepted, and treated with love and compassion despite the fact I had nothing to give but myself. Although I am sure they appreciated having their lawn mowed, it was the simple act of listening to their stories, being present, showing mutual respect and caring, and the acceptance that we both appreciated. I felt safe, secure, accepted, and happy – even though no money was involved. Weird. Then something else happened; their vulnerability and acceptance allowed me to also become emotionally vulnerable. Oddly it was this vulnerability—not money or power—that allowed me to find contentment (Kavanaugh, 1991).

From then on, things changed. I volunteered in an elementary school and felt a contentment and connection that did not exist when I volunteered at Republican headquarters. I began working in the school’s office for service learning, where I came to further understand the role that service plays in education, religion, personal development, and community involvement. I became concerned about social justice and the good of the world. I found I actually cared less about my money and cared more about my soul.

I spent my spring breaks in rural Mexico, where I really began to understand poverty. I

saw and experienced first-hand how a failing economy, competition for work, and no government support for agriculture or industry leads to situations with no good choices. I met people of supreme faith; people who had nothing else. And while we were there, we were able to debate the issue of the role of faith in privilege, exploring how the Bible itself presents paradoxes regarding poverty and wealth:

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 19:21-24, Revised Standard Version)

“It is when you store up treasures for yourself you are not rich in the sight of God” (Luke 12:20-21)

“How happy are the poor: yours is the Kingdom of God, but alas, you who are rich are having your consolation now.” (Luke 6:21-24)

Despite these verses, churches have thrived for hundreds of years in ornamentation and excess, even in the most difficult of economic times. Yet the church also provides for the poor and supports members who are in need of help. The church professes to care for all, yet excludes many. I have yet to understand any of the mixed messages from the church about oppressed populations. Again, too big for me to figure out, I can only take away the belief that ultimately, God wants us to care for each other:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison you came to see me...insofar as you did this to one

of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”
(Matthew 25:34-40)

If we serve the poor and treat those who are oppressed with kindness, are we doing all we can? (Kavanaugh, 1991)

It is not that simple. The thing that gives me strength also gives me unseen power. Not long ago, I heard something that suggested spirituality is also a function of privilege. I wanted to ignore this statement, primarily because I can't do this work without my faith. I can't imagine having to give this up. But it also reminded me that if my belief system is so important to me, it is likely equally as important to others. In fact, people give up homes, families, possessions, go into exile, fight wars, go to jail, and even die for the right to have and practice their beliefs. But I have an advantage. I have complete freedom to practice my faith openly. I can freely share my thoughts and opinions as they are shared by many of those with privilege within this country. I would like to think my belief system does not preclude me from understanding or connecting with others of differing beliefs, but I know I take this privilege and freedom for granted. I guess I don't have to give up my belief system, but I wish there was a way I could level the playing field.

After my return from Mexico, I became even more committed to living a life of service. The more involved I became in the community and the more I learned about oppression in my MSW classes, the harder it became to tolerate the contradiction that stratified our society. I decided that money was not the solution, but was the problem itself. I found myself getting angry at celebrities, professional athletes, politicians, and almost everyone else who did not care about the poor as much as I did. How could they all be so irresponsible? How could they justify million dollar homes, seven figure salaries, and private jets when so many people do not even have a place to live? But I also got mad at the clients too. I would get frustrated at learning a family arrived in town with nothing – no money no plan, and no

place to live. I couldn't hear their justifications that there was no work and no hope in the town they had left. I know now that this anger was my reaction to feeling powerless to actually help them.

I understand this anger is only a minute example of what those who struggle with poverty and oppression deal with every day. One time a friend was perusing my musical selections and pointed out how many of my musical choices are quite angry. When questioned about this, I could only answer that due to the trauma of my work life, I really don't need any more misery. I just wanted to feel something different and anger seemed to be the easiest choice. It was at that moment I began to question my understanding of violence, especially among oppressed populations. Could it be that for those who only feel powerlessness, hopelessness, and frustration, violence is one way to feel some type of control when resources and opportunity are lacking?

But I did not like feeling angry especially because I couldn't really understand what I was so angry about. Whether out of solidarity or as a way to manage my own feelings (Haney Lopez, 1996), I needed to prove to myself that I understood and supported this issue. I began to give up all the things I once found important and began to live a life of simplicity. I took public transportation, ate Ramen noodles, shopped at thrift stores, and spent my free time volunteering. But my new vow of poverty also included giving up many of the friends and activities that once provided me comfort and amusement. How could I possibly justify having fun when so many people in the world were struggling with misery, poverty, and pain? One evening, much to my dismay, my friends talked me into going out. As we were waiting to get into a downtown bar, I found myself wandering toward the corners, talking to the people panhandling. I just felt more comfortable there. At that moment, I realized how far I had gone. Giving up everything had not given others more. Deprivation had not eased anyone's pain or even made me feel any better. But I also knew that this was not real; that I could easily return to my life of comfort whereas those around

me could not. Because of my skin color, my family connections, my education, and my religious beliefs, I could change my decision to live in poverty. Others do not have the option to change their situation as easily. The acknowledgement of this makes me feel sad and helpless.

After having tried to experience both ends of the spectrum, I now realize there may not be a solution. The longer I am in the social work field, the more comfortable I am with the idea of accepting that some problems do not have solutions. In fact, both psychoanalytic theory (Kernberg, Selzer, Koenigsberg & Carr, 1989) and modern behavioral theories (Linehan, 1993) support psychological health as the ability to accept two seemingly contradictory ideas, thoughts, or opinions at the same time. For me, this means I can work with, help, serve, care about, and even understand those who struggle with poverty, oppression, and powerlessness without having to put myself in the same position. Much like other types of issues our clients present to us, we do not have to have experienced them first hand in order to empathize and talk through their difficulties. In fact, I am of more benefit to them if I can hold the hope for both of us without becoming overwhelmed by my own anger, sadness, misery, and pain.

Despite beginning to understand this within myself, I can remain judgmental about those whom, I believe, are people of privilege. A few years ago I went from working with populations who were clearly oppressed and underserved to working in a fee-for-service medical clinic. We do accept Medicare and Medicaid, but all patients must be able to pay. We do not do any indigent care, nor do we have a sliding scale fee. For the first time in my professional career, I began to work with patients who have access to resources. Working with others who have more than me is something I do not know if I am comfortable with, so I volunteer to take the Medicare/Medicaid patients. I claim to see these patients because I have a strong commitment to serve the underserved, which I do. But it also brings up a more troubling question for me, which is whether I need to treat this population as a way to maintain my own power (Haney Lopez,

1996). I would like to think it has more to do with trying to create equity and to provide a safe and compassionate environment for those I know other professionals tend to reject. But it is also something for me to be aware of and to continue questioning my intentions. This challenge has become a reality as I contemplate whether or not to see clients privately. This would force me into the position to decide how much to charge for my services and having to accept the reality that some may not be able to pay for them. I cannot deal with this reality yet, so I guess private practice will have to wait until I can make those hard decisions myself rather than allowing the system to do it for me.

I am hoping that I will have the chance to work through these judgments further by challenging myself to be able to find the same level of connection and vulnerability with those who may not be poor in the ways we typically define it. Recently, I received a wakeup call regarding this issue. Within our department a new, very high priced clinic was established. This clinic is restricted to people of privilege. Although it does not specifically say that on the brochure, the price for an intake is \$750 and they do not accept insurance. I was asked if I was going to do any work there. I quickly replied with a very self-righteous answer "No, I am committed to working with those who I know cannot afford me. It is not only the rich who deserve quality care." I believed what I was saying at the time and even found myself getting angry that anyone would challenge my commitment to serving the poor, which I also took as a challenge to my commitment to my faith. Several months later, I was staffing patient cases when I made a similar comment again, and was challenged with this question, "Do you believe that just because they have money, their problems are any less painful?" I wanted to answer yes, but have thought about that question frequently. I am trying to be empathetic to the idea of spiritual and emotional poverty, not just material poverty (Kavanaugh, 1991), which may be an even harder issue to resolve.

As a social worker, I take my commitment to working with oppressed populations very seriously, advocating for those who need it and

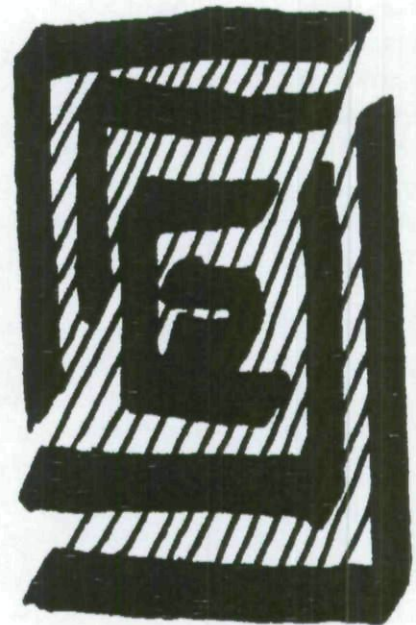
educating others on the significance of poverty and oppression. But as I educate those around me about issues of equality oppression, justice, and poverty, I also recognize that I have a lot to learn myself. In the experience of writing this narrative, I did not even touch on many other points I wanted and needed to make about the difficulties that exist among oppressed populations. But I think that was my struggle in the first place – this issue remains overwhelming, confusing, and paradoxical.

In the end, I don't know that I have a clear answer of how I went from "the little CEO" to being overwhelmed by guilt for drinking a Starbucks' white chocolate mocha. I guess I thought writing all of this down would give me some kind of answer or at least, a justification. Maybe no answer exists, but I can't allow myself to believe that. I can't accept that injustice and inequality are just a part of life. If I believed that giving up my white chocolate mocha would fix all of this, I happily would. But I don't think that is what this is all about. This is not just about serving the underserved, but also redefining my understanding of what it means to be "without." Poverty exists not only in those who lack resources. It also exists in those who have no hope, have lost their spirit, and do not know how to find peace or contentment. Maybe it's naiveté, maybe it's fear, or maybe it's professional survival, but I think I can understand these concepts without living them. After all, if I were as poor as those I serve, either financially, spiritually, or emotionally, what would I have to offer? I do think understanding and awareness are not enough; I also think I need to remain uncomfortable. I do not need to have an easy answer, but instead I need to sit with these complexities and contradictions so as to create enough of a problem for me that I have to do something about it. I don't know what that will look like, and maybe that was my difficulty with this narrative - I'm back where I started. I still have no way to resolve this, and unease about it all, but I think I am okay with that. Although I have not accepted inequity my place seems to be to stay in the struggle and attempt to find a middle path. I guess this is just where I need to be. For now.

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