

THE PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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In the following narrative, the author traces the often-traveled path of gaining privilege in the United States; in her case, from rural poverty in one of the poorest states to a relatively elite education and career possibilities. The climb upward was interrupted by the social upheavals of the 1960s that caused the author to reconsider her life and goals, and brought her back to her roots as an organizer and teacher.

The fact that I am able to write a narrative on privilege makes me a privileged human being. Just the fact that I am in the position to reflect on the subject indicates a privilege possessed by few, even in the most privileged society in human history

It was not always so. I was born and grew up in the narrowest setting possible in the United States: poor and rural, in a poor and rural county, state, and region. Many individuals I know from my background, including most members of my family say they never felt poor because everyone was poor. That's not how I remember it; I remember being ashamed and afraid, vulnerable and insecure. Being able to give voice to felt shame is an unparalleled privilege that I did not even know how to aspire to.

The process of recognizing privilege, and the lack thereof, has defined my life. That process has revolved around my ethnic identity, my status as a woman, my professional life, and radical politics; but above all, social class.

During the first six years of my life, my family sharecropped or rented farms near the tiny farming community of Piedmont, Oklahoma, where my father had grown up and his family had once owned land. Before I was born, my parents had sharecropped on a half-dozen farms in that area since they had married more than a decade before. The only crop the landlords allowed was cotton, a cash crop to sell. My father hated cotton; he wanted to raise food and stock. He wanted his own land to farm. He felt that raising and picking cotton

was like working in a factory. But he sharecropped to stay on the land until it was no longer possible, when cotton was replaced by wheat and mechanized. Then our family moved to Piedmont, and my father drove a tanker truck for a company based in a larger town, delivering diesel to the wheat farmers in west central Oklahoma.

We were not as poor as the families that lived in shacks on land they squatted until they were evicted, then moved on, passing through our school; not as poor all the time as the migrant cotton pickers, mostly African American, that my family joined in really hard times; not as poor as the Native Americans who lived on the main street of the county seat and in the rural Indian towns that dotted the county; and as my father always reminded us, not as poor as our relatives who lived in squalid tenements and run down shacks in the city where they could not raise their own food or keep a milk cow or hunt as we did. And we were not as poor as my mother had been growing up; the child of a Native American mother who had died when she was two and a drunken, itinerant Irish father. My mother was passed around to foster homes, to her sisters' homes, to an institution, and was often out on the streets of her hometown before finally marrying my father at 15.

A friend who grew up rural, poor, and "half-breed" (Métis) in Saskatchewan described poverty as a process of inferiorization, leaving a permanent imprint, no matter what one's future station in life (he, like me, became a university professor). He

called that imprint *damage*, and I agree. If one is fortunate enough to be conscious of the damage done, the rest of life becomes a process of trying to undo it. If one is not conscious, states of jealousy, resentment, and anger permeate life - Richard Nixon is a notorious and tragic example.

Those of us in the poorer classes who are bright or ambitious or simply at the right place at the right time are often plucked out of our circumstances and provided opportunities that are unimaginable in poor and working class communities. We are the ones, had we not been plucked out, who might have become community leaders and organizers for change and empowerment.

In the United States, uniquely among societies, from its beginning, there has existed a myth of "bettering" oneself, popularized in the early 19th century by author and minister Horatio Alger. Following a near workers' revolution in 1880-1940, and following the economic recovery resulting from the war industry, commodity consumerism—particularly home and car ownership—was introduced to the masses. Along with the extreme nationalism that was a by-product of war and a designated enemy, communism, class-consciousness has been very nearly erased while the income gap has widened.

One way of class climbing, easier for the female than the male in our patriarchal order, is "marrying up." I did that (I thought), but my own class status led me to overestimate the relative insignificance of my climb, because I got nowhere near the ruling class or even the upper middle class. My own class background had me defining "rich" as having a brick house, running water, electricity, a bathroom (rather than outhouse), a new car, a family vacation every summer to a national park (preferably out of state), and a family's capacity to send their children for higher education. In my community, only a handful of families out of a hundred or so could realize those luxuries. I became familiar with city life during my last year of high school when I moved to Oklahoma City to go to trade school. While there, I realized that most of my classmates at that impoverished school had running water,

bathrooms, and electricity, so I adjusted my definition of rich somewhat.

My husband's family appeared wealthy to me. His father was a union carpenter who had become construction superintendent for a medium-sized privately owned construction company that built large commercial buildings around the Midwest and South. His family had moved around a lot, making them quite cosmopolitan in my eyes since I had only traveled to a few counties in Oklahoma and made one trip to see relatives in Texas. By the time we married, his father had retired and started his own small company for work on smaller local projects. The family owned a large piece of land on the northeast edge of Oklahoma City; land that had been in the mother's family for generations, once farmed but no longer. Some of the land was sold at a good profit to the state to build a new highway. So they were comfortable but not rich, as I would later realize when I met an actual member of the Rockefeller family.

The father had built a family home that seemed like a mansion to me, although it was only one story with three bedrooms and two baths; the rooms were not even that large. It was made of native stone with a huge stone fireplace; I had never seen a fireplace except in storybooks and movies. Next to the house was a garage, which housed the black Lincoln that impressed me more than anything else. Attached to the enclosed stone garage was a small three-room garage apartment with carpeted floors. My husband and I lived in that cottage for the first three years of our lives together; it was larger and finer than any place I had ever lived.

I had imagined that both my husband and I would continue studying at the University of Oklahoma where we had met my first year, his second. I thought his rich father would support us both, but that was not to be. My husband did not want to rely on his father now that he was married, and convinced me that I should "wait" to finish school, and work until he graduated. I went to work at a gas meter factory while my husband worked weekends at a gas station and summers as a carpenter. We even paid rent on the cottage. Despite this total self-reliance, my sisters-in-law, who did

not work, called me a freeloader who had married for money. This carried some truth, but was unrealized.

I remained in this family and the marriage for seven years, my husband and I moving to San Francisco halfway through. The mother had died the year before we married, and a new wife entered the family my first year there. She had come from a bustling Oklahoma town where, as the wife of a doctor, she had been one of the society ladies; she herself, however, had come from more humble beginnings. She wanted more than small town society, so left her husband and moved with her two teenaged children to Oklahoma City, where she met my father -in-law, a widower with his own business. She was two decades younger than his 67 years. My husband was barely 20, and his older five sisters—all married—were upset about this pretentious intruder trying to replace their beloved and humble mother. Every day they created drama around her behavior and projects, which included remodeling the old-fashioned interior of the family home. I had much in common with this “commoner,” but I kept my distance from her and joined in the complaining.

At the same time the sisters made me a project: a civilizing project. Three of the sisters lived in their own houses on the property with their families, while the two other sisters lived out of state. One sister took me under her wing as a mentor, calling me a “diamond in the rough” that needed polishing. I wanted to be polished; to be like her I imitated her in every respect: I started smoking, I read everything she read (literature, philosophy, history), I listened to her music (folk music, classical music, Harry Belafonte, Josh White). I dreamed her dreams of moving to San Francisco and meeting beatniks; I quit going to the lowly Southern Baptist Church and finally quit church altogether, embracing science as she did. I also learned liberal politics from her and the rest of the family. They were New Deal liberals who opposed segregation; these were the days of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and white supremacist violence in the South.

I became privileged intellectually, in my attitudes, my way of dressing, and way of

talking. I began looking down on people like myself: poor and rural, uneducated and ignorant, fundamentalist Christian. Not only was I smarter than the people I came from, I was better than the majority of people because I was liberal and agnostic in a sea of conservative Christians in Oklahoma and the rest of the South.

It was quite a blow when my husband and I moved to San Francisco and found that our tastes, looks, and politics were considered quite unpolished. “Okies” were still looked down on in California. I enrolled at San Francisco State where bohemian and radical types were omnipresent in their visibility if not in numbers. I wanted to be like them. I reset my aspirations leftwards, eschewing the idea of “making it” in the prescribed way. My husband turned more conservative as I sought radical politics in the dawning of the sixties; so I left him and his family to pursue my own path, alone in the world, having become alienated from my own family and class and kind. I learned to lie about my background, to say I was from the Midwest, that my father raised horses (he was a rodeo man and had one quarter horse). But in radical circles, no one really talked about his or her background or asked about others that much.

Although it was common knowledge, it was news to my naïve self that the movement was a collection of factions and cliques. Hard as I tried, I couldn’t find acceptance or mentorship. They didn’t know what to make of me or what to do with me, and I had no idea how to navigate the factions or understand their differences. The Movement was Black and White; Blacks were the impoverished victims, Whites the rich oppressors. They spoke of egalitarianism, equality even seemed to support “the working class,” but there were no workers or working class individuals among them. It would be a decade before I figured out that the Movement people I so wanted to befriend were themselves from the upper middle class, and some actually from the ruling class. They looked down on me.

After graduating with a history degree from San Francisco State, I went to graduate school for a year at UC Berkeley, then transferred to UCLA to specialize in Latin

American History. During my four years at UCLA as a graduate student and teaching assistant, I became privileged, and became aware of my privilege in a way I had not before. I also became aware of another aspect of my inferiority. I came to understand that it was not all about class. I was one of seven women graduate students in the large department, and there was only one woman faculty member. There was one African American and two Chicano graduate students (all males), and all the faculty members were white men, with the exception of one woman. Since the single woman professor specialized in "Near East" history and I was in Latin American History, I never had her for a class or as a mentor. Only at that time did I realize that in my whole time as an undergraduate student, I had never had a female professor or a professor of color.

A part of my new consciousness came from a budding, inchoate feminism reflected in the publication and best-seller status of Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique*, and the English language publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (it would be several years before a mass movement exploded). I had read the latter book in 1963, which led directly to me leaving my husband. However, the message from both books seemed to be that family, domesticity, motherhood, and being a wife were what crushed a woman's full potential. Yet when I had escaped from those traps and was a privileged history graduate student in one of the best departments in the country, an unmarried fellow graduate student asked me to type his paper. All the other male students were married to wives who worked to send them to school, just as I had done for my husband. I didn't have a "wife" to support me and type my papers.

At the same time I was becoming an outspoken feminist, I became increasingly involved in anti-racist activities, including joining the first university anti-apartheid group in the country, which was at UCLA, founded by South African exiles, Black and White. The Watts uprising in the summer of 1965 was next door to where I lived. The United Farm Workers and increasing Chicano militancy enveloped me, as did the revolutionary

movements and leaders in Latin America, especially Ché Guevara. But above all, the Vietnam War stole my heart and soul and made me a full time radical organizer (calling myself a revolutionary) by 1967.

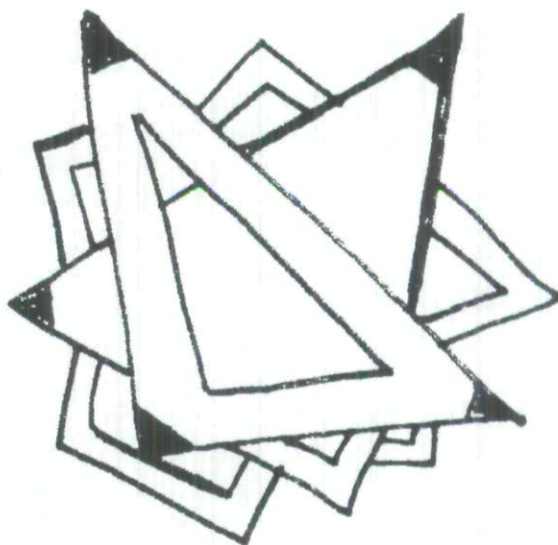
For the first time, I saw my class oppression in terms of capitalism and gender discrimination and in the context of domestic racism and U.S. imperialism. For the first time, I could recognize and acknowledge my own privilege, and responsibility, in terms of race and being a U.S. citizen.

On fire with anger at the male supremacy I experienced in the society at large, but even more appalled at its expression in the antiwar and civil rights movements, I decided to devote myself to organizing for a mass women's liberation movement, which from its onset would embody anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism, not just pacifism as the existing women's peace groups emphasized; we would support national liberation, not just denounce imperialism and war. I also decided I had to burn my bridges with academia as I learned about its role in providing brain power to the system. I moved to the Northeast from which all power appeared to flow, and immediately found kindred spirits awakening to feminism. For the next two years I put my all into organizing women's liberation groups, as well as starting a journal, and travelling the country. But soon it became clear that radical anti-capitalism, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism were becoming marginalized as a strong current of counter-revolution prevailed; it was not so much that the right wing came to dominate immediately; rather that liberalism took up the most superficial aspects of radical analysis and drained it of content and power, then the right wing filled the vacuum.

After a stint of workplace organizing, I got involved with the American Indian Movement following the 1973 Wounded Knee uprising. I took the work seriously, and saw that what I could contribute most was research skills and teaching. I returned to UCLA to complete my dissertation and doctorate, and began teaching at a state university in the fledgling Native American Studies program, helping to develop a Department of Ethnic Studies.

As an educator, understanding privilege has been the bedrock of what I attempt to impart to students, just as I do as an organizer, a writer, and as a historian. My personal experience growing up as I did has placed me in conflict with my educator colleagues that have come from privileged settings and tend to see those who are unprivileged as the "other." This "othering" is, I believe, more harmful than outright discrimination and nearly always leads such educators (and organizers, social workers, etc.) to cynicism and disappointment. They need to begin with an act of faith and proceed from there: Every human being has the capacity to learn and to become self-determined; then, ask themselves: What do I need to learn in order to assist in that process? It is easier for me, because I have experienced my own process of learning and self-determination. But it is a requirement for anyone who seeks the liberation of all individuals and communities.

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