

My White Privilege

I first experienced my white privilege before I had ever seen or heard that phrase anywhere. I hadn't heard of it not because white privilege did not yet exist; it most certainly did exist. White Privilege has existed not for mere decades, but for centuries in America. I had not yet heard of it because I was only four years old at the time.

My family and I were traveling by train from Evansville, Indiana, where my maternal grandfather was a maintenance foreman for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad, down to Lehigh Acres, Florida, where my grandparents had purchased a retirement lot. It was the summer of 1955, and we had stopped to change trains in one of the southern towns along the way. I don't remember much about the trip except for the look and feel of the Pullman sleeping car, and except for the drinking fountain in what, to a four-year-old, seemed to be a cavernous waiting area with a cold, stone floor.

There were several black people sitting around this drinking fountain across from where I and my family were standing. A small, black boy, a couple of years older than I was, went over to the fountain and took a drink. I had never seen one of those fancy machines before, so I walked over there to try it out for myself. All the black people sitting there, young and old alike, watched me head in their direction. They were all smiling and speaking to each other in such a low tone of voice that I could not hear what they were saying. Just as I was about to reach the fountain, someone picked me

up from behind. I twisted around to see this older, red-faced, white-haired man who was carrying me back to the other side. He said,

“That one’s not for you!”

And as he set me down in front of the one on the “white” side of the room he said, “This is your drinking fountain.”

My mother took me by the hand and said to the man something like,

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t see him walk over there.”

“That’s okay, ma’am, he hasn’t learnt what’s right, yet.”

As he walked away, my mother held me up to the “right” drinking fountain saying,

“This is the one for the white people.”

I asked her, “Why?”

“That’s just the way it is down here. There’s one for them and there’s one for us.”

This was my introduction to the concept of “us and them.”

After I took my drink she set me back down in front of the fountain and went back to talking with the adults. I looked all over that drinking fountain. I felt it all along each side; and then, I stepped back so I could see the top of it. Then I walked out to the middle of the room and looked at the “black” water fountain; and then, looked back at the “white” one. I looked back and forth a couple of times, trying to get my four-year-old head to understand. All the black people were watching me intently, and the adults were looking right at me, smiling and nodding their heads. I know now what they were thinking:

“That’s right, little man! Ain’t no damn difference!”

So, even though I didn't know the words, white privilege was having the "right" water fountain; or the better seats in the theater; or the largest, cleanest bathrooms; or the seats towards the front of the bus. Right. And so the general indoctrination began. It wasn't blatant or organized indoctrination; it was fairly subtle. Especially for me; since my family moved to New York the next year, and I wasn't subjected to the pervasive, systemic bigotry prevalent throughout the southern states back then.

I'm sure I must have experienced white privilege in more subtle ways after that, but I grew up in an area on Long Island, New York with few black people. I did not see a person of color's life for comparison for several years. But perhaps that in itself is an example of White Privilege. Why were there no black people in my neighborhood? I did not meet a black person until my parents hired a black lady to help my mother clean house once a week. After that, it was not until I met my friend, Bruce, one of the sons of the only black family whose kids went to my High School. It wasn't until after graduation, while in the Army, that I had my next blatant experience of White Privilege.

It was sometime around the Spring of 1970, while I was in the Army at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. One of my friends from Basic Training (or "boot camp" as most people called it) lived in the area; and therefore, he had a car. We were returning to base one afternoon after a shopping trip, when we were stopped by the local constable. As soon as we were pulled over to the side of the road, my friend jumped out of the car and went back to talk to the police officer. When he got back to the car, he told me that the officer wanted to talk to me.

I rarely use descriptive adjectives when referring to my friends; however, in this case, it is quite important for me to say that my friend was a black man. He was one of

the nicest, gentlest, soft-spoken, intelligent men I have ever known; and what he looked like had nothing to do with it. He got back into the car and gave me a sideways glance that I interpreted to mean: *Be careful !*

The officer got out of his police cruiser and walked up to the passenger side of the car where I was seated. He looked like every cliché of a good-old-boy southern policeman that I have ever seen or heard about. His very large frame was topped with a wide-brimmed smokey-the-bear hat, and his belly sagged over the top of his black, leather belt which held up a black, leather holster containing a large-frame, chromed revolver with a pearl hand-grip. He asked me,

“So, what are ya’ll doin’ here today?”

“I’m just havin’ this boy drive me back to the army base. Is everything okay?”

He immediately relaxed and gave me a great big smile as he said,

“Why, sure! That’s fine. I just needed to make sure ya’ll weren’t in any trouble,” and to my friend he said, “Well, you heard him, boy. Git this man where he needs to go!”

“Yes, sir!” my friend told him, “I’m goin’ right now.”

He started the car, put it into gear, signaled for a left turn, and pulled back onto the road as he said to me,

“You did good! Now don’t look at me until we’re down the road a piece. You don’t talk to your black driver.”

After we had driven a mile or so on down the road, I looked over at him and asked,

“What the heck was that all about?”

“If you hadn’t been here with me I would have had to go down to the police station and show them all my ID cards, and maybe even call the base to prove I was in the Army.”

“But what did he pull you over for in the first place?”

“He didn’t see you there slouched down in your seat until after we were on the side of the road, or he wouldn’t have stopped me. He thought I was alone; so he pulled me over because I was *driving while black*.”

Most white people today don’t consider themselves prejudiced, and most are not. Therefore, they don’t understand what it means when black people talk about White Privilege. But I wonder how many white people stop to think that they have never been stopped by a police officer for *driving while white*.

My next experience with white privilege was in 1971, while I was in Advanced Training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. One Saturday morning, I was hitch-hiking my way up to the local college, where a friend of mine from back home was attending classes. My ride dropped me off on the side of the main road, where he needed to turn off onto a side street. It was right about noon, so I looked around for a place to have lunch. There was only one building anywhere near me on this sparsely populated section of the roadway. The building was long and rectangular and set back from the road with several cars parked outside. It did not have any signs outside, so I strolled over there to see if it was, indeed, a restaurant. There was an entrance door on the narrow side of the building, facing me, and I went inside through that doorway.

As soon as I stepped inside, I could see four young girls sitting together in one of the booths to my right set against the front windows facing the road. A long counter

on my left stretched all the way to the wall in front of me at the end of the room. There were several round stools with red, vinyl seat-covers in front of the counter, each supported by a single, thick, chromed leg. Behind the counter stood a large, black man, wearing a white pair of pants and a white t-shirt. He had his arms folded across his chest and a blank expression on his face as he watched me walk down to where he stood behind the counter. I sat down on a stool across from him and said,

“I’ll have a cheeseburger, fries and a root beer.”

He just stood there glaring at me until, finally, he said,

“You in the wrong side.”

I looked up at him with what, I’m sure, must have been a bewildered look on my face for a moment before I said,

“The wrong side? What do you mean?”

He visibly relaxed somewhat as he dropped his arms to his sides and asked,

“You not from around here, are you?”

“No, I’m from New York. I’m down here in the Army at Fort Rucker.”

He smiled at me as he placed both his hands on the counter in front of me, leaned forward and said,

“This is the *black* side. You gots to go ‘round to the other side.”

I thought my jaw was going to slam into the counter as my mouth gaped open. I looked around me and saw that I was the only white person there. The four young girls in the booth were all black and were whispering to each other as they stole furtive glances in my direction. I turned back to this now smiling, big, black cook and said,

“Well, I’ll tell you what, I’d just as soon stay here, because I wouldn’t fit in with those people next door.”

He leaned closer and said,

“No, you don’t understand. You *gots* to go over there.”

“You mean there might be trouble for you?”

“*And* for you.”

I sighed and shook my head as I got up and told him, “Okay.”

I shuffled towards the door to leave, but as I passed by those four high-school-age girls I stopped and turned toward them, saying,

“You ladies don’t have to worry, because you’re not going to have to put up with this crap for much longer. It is *not* like this up north.”

I turned and walked out the door, and I could hear them giggling and whispering to each other as I left.

I was slinking along the front of the building towards the other side, when a stern-looking guy who was just getting out of his truck confronted me. He said,

“Did I just see you come out of that other side?”

My self-preservation kicked in as I said,

“Yeah. I”m not from around here, and I didn’t know that was the nigger side.”

He smiled really big as he put his hand on my shoulder, and told me,

“Well, come on in to the *right* side and git some of our good home cookin’.”

He escorted me inside, walked over to one of the tables to sit with his friends, and left me to sit on one of the stools at the counter. The guy behind the counter took

my order and walked over to this little window that opened into the black side. It seems that the black guy from the other side was the cook for *both* sides of the restaurant.

When the counterman set my meal in front of me, I was looking at the biggest burger I had ever seen. It hung over the edge of the bun by a good half inch all around, and came with *three* big pickle spears and a pile of lettuce, tomatoes and onions. I looked over at the pass-through window to see the black cook handing through a plate filled with a huge mound of french fries. The counterman was looking down and pointing at the fries, chastising the cook for the over-sized order. The cook looked right at me as I nodded to him, and he returned the nod. He had obviously enjoyed my short visit to his side of the restaurant.

I had to get a to-go bag for all of those french fries, because I was not going to leave my gift behind. I walked out of that restaurant thinking to myself that those crackers never realized that a black guy had lunch with them in their side of the restaurant. Even if he was only black on the inside, at least for a little while, anyway.

The reason I am writing about this now in 2026 is because that last incident happened in 1971, which is almost exactly *fifty-five years ago*; and because, unlike what I told those young ladies in that restaurant, some of this crap *does still happen* in places in America today. It makes me sad and angry that some people still teach their children to hate and fear another race of people. And some of those children have grown up to become police officers. And those police officers have caused the deaths of some of the black people that have been in their care. That's right; I said *in their care*. Someone who has been arrested, has not yet been convicted in a court of law, still has all the rights accorded to every American citizen. And they all deserve the

same care and respect regardless of what they are accused of, or where they came from, or what they look like. We need to treat them like we treat any of our relatives. Because that is what they are.

According to the latest DNA research, every human on earth descended from sub-Saharan Africans; so today we are distant cousins with every other human on earth, and all of our ancient ancestors were black. So, therefore, there really isn't a Black Race; or a White Race; or a Yellow Race; or a Red Race; or even a Red, White, and Blue Race. There is only the Human Race; we are all related. Let's start acting like it. It's been too long. Get it together. Fix it. Now.