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THE DISTORTED DEFINITION OF PRIVILEGE

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I'd like to talk about environmental racism; more specifically, the necessity for each of us to reflect on our own lived experience with the natural world through the lenses of race, privilege, and oppression. I am also interested in exploring the importance of divesting from social constructs that perpetuate cycles of harm.

This topic is of great interest to me since taking a course entitled Afro-Environmentalism. I've been gifted with knowledge that has opened my eyes to the fraught relationship between nature

and people of African descent. Knowing more has prompted me to pay more attention to the backstory in all situations. I'm thankful because it enables me to better understand how we arrived where we are now.

It's unfortunate that our automatic response to someone's hardship is to blame and question the victim. Much more useful would be to question what has happened to the person to lead them to where they are. After all, a "normal" response isn't born from extraordinary circumstances. The path to a better life experience requires acknowledging and dismantling harmful constructs from the past and that live in the present.

Delving into our twice weekly classes presented me with some challenges, the biggest being discomfort. My lineage is predominantly German. The actions of both my ancestral country and race have been disturbing, to put it mildly. As a result, I have zero desire to be associated with that ideology. I've made a habit of taking on regret, shame, and guilt for others' actions and was worried that this class would be that type of party.

Another challenge for me was to take an honest look at my own history and its impact on the person I am today. I was well into adulthood when I became aware that the activities that I and those around me filled our time with could be categorized as "white people shit". Summers spent camping, at the beach, on the water, and in the winter, skiing, sledding, and ice fishing serve as the backdrop that my memories play out on. I never factored race into them.

Even being teased for the past fifteen years and being told my stories really show my "white card" didn't alert me to the big picture. It didn't become fully clear to me until the class that my very exposure to open spaces that these activities took place on is an example of white privilege.

It was difficult for me to comprehend that access to the outdoors is an aspect of racial privilege. I didn't want to help further this agenda. I didn't want to be complicit in other's oppression. But when the scope of environmental racism within our social, economic, and political systems was shown to me I realized that I needed to view my experience through a broader lens.

It's difficult for me to see society from this viewpoint. However, I'm fully on board with bringing these issues to light. Our course text, *Black Earth Wisdom*, demanded that I reflect on the fact

that “these experiences of childhood are what mold us and make us who we are.” How we translate the life we see, feel, smell, and touch as we grow up shape who we become. (194)

This newfound knowledge that my recreational choices have largely been determined by what I had access to forced me to acknowledge that the energy of my environment growing up was affected by that access. For example, my entire youth, I felt completely safe to walk alone down darkened or deserted streets. I don’t have an actual memory of fearing for my safety because of my surroundings prior to incarceration. Of course, on an abstract level I understood that there were geographical areas that are “dangerous”, but with no concrete indication of it in my own life, it was easy for me to remain blind to the planning that went into designing “such” dangerous areas. It was easy to ignore that disparity in access to open green spaces was determined by race.

One of the many important things that this class has shown me is how environmental racism bleeds into other facets of our lives, not just the monumental and noticeable parts.

At first, it felt weird to look back at being forced to eat brussels sprouts or never eating honeybuns or flaming hot chips (until incarceration) and reframe it through the lens of privilege. My younger self would’ve much preferred chips to the fresh vegetable platter that was my snacking option. Thankfully, I’m aware now that the simple accessibility I had to fresh fruits and vegetables, regardless of my palate’s stubborn dislike of them and the inaccessibility to them to specific populations is why “the dreaded brussels sprouts” and “privilege” can be spoken in the same sentence.

The best way that I can contribute to and effect positive change is to share what I’ve learned with others who don’t know it...yet. I can also invest my energy and attention in people who are on the path to healing and desire equality for each of us, no matter who we are.

My conclusions about all this were alarming to me mostly because I believe they may be indicative of a larger problem. My discomfort resulted from my struggle to come to terms with a privilege I wasn’t even aware I had.

I believe there are a lot of people with a distorted definition of privilege too; not because they (or I) are racist assholes, but because we’re dangerously misinformed. With the knowledge that I

gained in this class I show up as a better version of me. We need to educate the masses for real change to happen.

Author Bio: Ashleigh Smith is 39 years old and has been incarcerated since she was 23. She's currently enrolled at EMU, working on her BA. Ashleigh's other work can be found on the blog, LettersfromChristopher.com, *Prison Writer*, and Oakland University's *Annual Art Review* (May 2024).

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