

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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The Undoing of a Perfectionist

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Abstract

“The Undoing of a Perfectionist” is a reflective piece about the challenges particular to being a White trainer on issues of race and privilege. The primary audience for this submission is White people who are learning to step up and speak out about racism and White skin privilege. By sharing a personal experience, I hope to help others recognize the inherent contradictions in this work for White people *and* the value of sticking with it. My story is not uncommon, of replicating White supremacist behaviors even as I am teaching other White people about White supremacy! I know that many White people who engage in this work find themselves in similar situations. My message is that, yes, you will find yourself in these difficult moments if you choose to step up and speak out—and that you can learn to move through the discomfort. That is part of the process of unlearning White supremacist behavior.

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It wasn't the first time I had been called out. Getting "called out" seems to go with the territory of doing racial justice work, particularly for White people. There is so much I don't know. And probably never will. This was before I had attended a White Privilege Conference where the concept of being "called in" had entered my repertoire.

The setting was Chicago, at a national conference for education activists. I had offered to co-develop and co-lead a workshop that we called "I'm Racist and So Are You: Increasing our Awareness of White Privilege and Power and How to Use Them for Racial Justice." We had a packed room, 60 people when we were expecting 40. Our audience was mostly White people, which is who we said the workshop was geared towards, from Maine high school students to seasoned community organizers and classroom teachers.

My White co-trainer and I thought our session was going well. We rolled with our carefully scripted agenda: a fun opening activity to reveal people's unconscious biases, a short presentation on the cycle of socialization, a handout and reflections on behaviors that perpetuate White supremacy, strategies for supporting the leadership of people of Color. Time was short and the room was hot, but people seemed positively engaged. Until we got to the very end. We asked everybody to go round and say a word or phrase about what they got out of the session or how they were feeling.

"Frustrated."

"Oppressed."

"Angry."

"Frustrated."

OUCH. Totally caught off guard, I was horrified. The fact that the negative comments mostly came from about half a dozen people of Color in the room was even more horrifying. They expressed feelings of voicelessness, at a conference that held as one of its guidelines for healthy dialogue to "be aware of power and voice in the room."

During the session, we had talked about behaviors that go with White supremacist culture and why they are problematic. Behaviors like defensiveness and fear of open conflict—the very things that hurdled through my brain in those closing moments in that crowded room. I was paralyzed.

All I could think of was: *Here I was stepping out to help White people deal with their privilege, and replicating the racism and oppression we so nobly thought we were fighting.*

How could I have been so insensitive? How could we have designed a workshop without thinking through more carefully how it might be experienced by people of Color? How could I have co-led the workshop and not even *noticed* how it was being received by some of the participants of Color until the very end, when we asked people to go around and say how they felt?

A few people came up afterwards and tried to reassure us that the workshop went well. In my state of defensiveness, all I could think was, here's another White supremacist behavior: the right to comfort. I was still horrified.

It's moments like this when I have been tempted to quit this work. That, too, is a privilege of being White.

Weeks later, I received the written evaluations from our session. On the top were all the negative evaluations, which I continued to be fixated on.

I only went back and took in the positive evaluations many months later, at the urging of a colleague. I then realized that the positive evaluations outweighed the negative by four to one. Yet, I still needed to get my perfectionist self out of the way, in order to reflect on what I had to learn from this experience. I didn't have a way to go back and ask those folks who attended our workshop. I needed to come out of my protective shell and discuss the experience with colleagues, White and of Color, rather than drown or be paralyzed by how far from "perfect" the workshop had been.

What were the lessons for me as a White racial justice trainer? There were many.

We could have been clearer up front about who our workshop was for and why, what we would do and what we would not do in our short time together. In planning the workshop, including a trainer of Color, particularly when trying something new and untested, could have brought in a broader perspective from the start. Co-facilitating with a trainer of Color would have made it more likely that, between us, we might have picked up on the dynamic and feelings in the room. Lastly, we left virtually no open space in our agenda. How could the voices in the

room be heard when the entire agenda was so tightly scripted?

The other lessons are about *me*, calling my perfectionism to task. There is no way you can do work around racism and always get it right. Rarely is there a "right" way. If anything, the one "right" I have learned is that, no matter how badly I fail in any particular attempt to subvert racism, I need to pick myself up and keep at it. And accept, again and again, that my imperfections are what make me human.

I used to say—scornfully—that we treat racism like it's nuclear waste. After this workshop I was reminded, once again, that in many ways it is. Toxic for generations. And we don't yet know its half-life. It's messy, and must be handled carefully, very carefully. It's so easy to continue to perpetuate the damage.

I still have a hard time sitting with the idea that my imperfections are what allow connectedness to take place. Like so many of our behaviors, my desire to be "perfect" in everything I do is deeply embedded, and often unconscious. The best I can do is be aware of this desire, try to reprogram my impulse towards perfectionism, and practice generosity towards myself, faults and all. It might even be okay to put those positive evaluations under my pillow, or post them on my wall—if that's what it takes to keep me going. And continue to learn how to hold the apparent contradiction of acceptance and criticism that keeps me learning and growing as a White person doing racial justice work.