

## **Understanding White Supremacy, Challenging White Privilege and Working for Social Justice<sup>1</sup>**

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How does white supremacy look in 2009? What are the challenges and what are the opportunities we face in a time when some people are saying that if a black man can be elected president we have become a postracial society? How do we encourage white people to take responsibility for challenging specific forms of white privilege built around issues of land, labor, education, housing, and self-identity? Let's move beyond generalities about racism and white privilege and move into responsibility for addressing concrete issues of racial justice.

I began by asking people in the audience to pair up with another person and to talk about one impact the civil rights movement had on their lives. Then I asked people to pair up with someone else and talk about a young person who inspires them in some way.

Our struggle for social justice is built on the contributions of those who have gone before us and is inspired by our vision of the world we want to leave to our children and our children's children.

I want to acknowledge the creative spirits in the world that nurture and sustain us and that connect us to each other and to the plant and animal life around us. I want to acknowledge the earth that also nurtures and sustains us. I want to acknowledge the Native Peoples whose land we are on. I want to acknowledge my own Jewish foreparents and how much they have taught me about survival and social justice. I want to acknowledge the vast numbers of people around the world whose labor makes it possible for us to meet together and have this conversation. The

people who make our clothes, computers, grow our food, and clean our rooms. Finally, I want to acknowledge all the people who helped make the conference possible, staff and volunteers.

The inspiration for my work grows out of the labor movement in the 1930s, the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and the women's movement in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. My work specifically grew out of the women's movement, particularly the parts of that movement that dealt with male violence—the battered women's movement, the sexual assault prevention movement, and the child assault prevention movement.

We need to look at the social, political, and economic context we are in, particularly the three major issues confronting our times: war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and our involvement in other conflicts throughout the world; the financial crisis and the tremendous inequalities of wealth and power in the United States; and global warming. We are living in a declining empire and our leaders are trying to manage and remain in control during the descent. I also referenced the history of Memphis and the garbage worker's strike that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was here to support when he was murdered.

There are two questions that guide me in my work:

What do you stand for?

Who do you stand with?

We often ask ourselves and others the first question and it is an important question. Equally important, but less often asked, is the second question. When people of color are angry about racism, my first response is to say that I'm not racist and I treat everyone equally. But their anger is not directed at me. They want to know if I stand with them in the struggle for racial justice. When women express their anger about male violence to me and other men I also want to throw

up my hands in protest and tell them that I don't hit my partner. But they want to know if I stand with them against male violence.

The questions are: Who do I stand with? What am I doing about ... ? How do I show up in struggles for social justice ? Am I acting as an ally in these struggles?

It is important to separate three different things when talking about racism and other issues:

The first level is prejudice—the distortions and lies we've all been fed by our textbooks and the media. Prejudice afflicts everyone, and we all have a responsibility to address our own. Prejudice and stereotyping are not racism. Given the misinformation, stereotypes, and lies in our textbooks, media, and everyday culture, we all have prejudices and false beliefs about other groups of people. We each have a responsibility to unlearn the misinformation we have accumulated.

The second level is power. If a person has prejudice and possesses the power to commit a socially sanctioned act of discrimination, harassment, exploitation, marginalization, disrespect, or violence against a group of people labeled as racially inferior, then that person is perpetrating an act of interpersonal racism. Looking to the larger, institutional level, interpersonal racism is caused by, and further reinforces, institutional and cultural racism regardless of the intentions of individual white people.

For example: I can be a white teacher in a school and treat all my students, white and students of color with respect and care, helping each one to master the class material and move on to the next grade level. However, if I am teaching in a school that tracks students of color into lower-achievement classes than white students, or disciplines students of color more harshly than

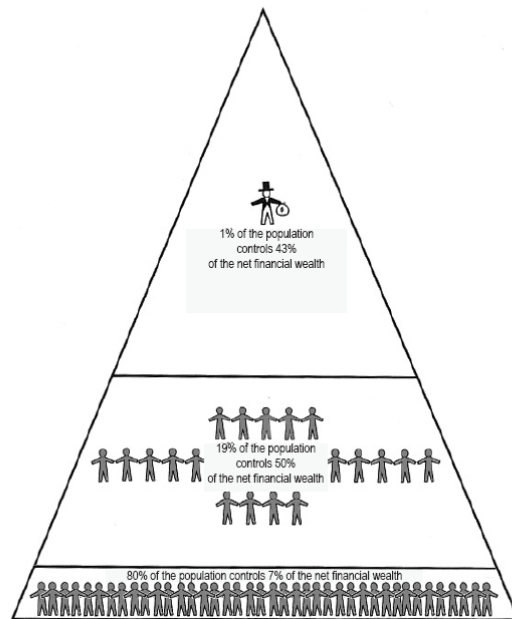
white students, or doesn't hire and support faculty of color, or uses a curriculum that doesn't include the contributions of people of color to our society, then regardless of my personal practice as a teacher, I am teaching in an institution that enforces racism.

The third level is often less visible but is the most essential—the institutional level that operates regardless of my personal intentions, behavior, or knowledge.

Training in racism and other systems of oppression starts early. As documented by Debra van Ausdale in her book *The First R*, three-, four-, and five-year-olds are already learning about the powerful significance of differences among them, whether or not the adults around them notice that this is happening. White children are already producing identities of superiority and control, and children of color are already having to fend off attacks to their identity from white children.

Systems of oppression confer power and benefits to those in control and make others vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and marginalization. But not all in the more powerful group benefit equally. We need to look at the economic system to see who really benefits from racism. Our current political/economic structure looks like the pyramid below.

## THE ECONOMIC PYRAMID



In the United States 1 percent of the population controls about 43 percent of the net financial wealth,<sup>3</sup> and the next 19 percent of the population controls another 50 percent. That leaves 80 percent of the population struggling to gain a share of just under 7 percent of what's left.<sup>3</sup> The result is that large numbers of people in the United States spend most of their time trying to get enough money to feed, house, clothe, and otherwise support themselves and their families, and many end up without adequate housing, food, health care, work, or educational opportunities.

We refer to the top 1 percent as the ruling class because members of this class hold positions of power as corporate executives, politicians, policy makers, and funders for political campaigns, policy research, public policy debates, and media campaigns. They “rule” because they are positioned to make decisions that govern the public world. This is not to say that they collectively act as kings or monarchs or dictators; most or all of the ruling class members would

deny that they “rule” at all. Often enough their actions contradict and conflict with each other, rather than representing a monolithic governing front. Nevertheless, it is the economic structure—the culture of power—in American (and increasingly global) life that places them in the role of decision makers and reproduces that role, generation to generation, even when not individually pursued.

The ruling class maintains the power and money to influence, and often to determine, the decisions that affect our lives, including where jobs will be located and what kinds of jobs they will be; where environmental toxins are dumped; how much money is allocated to build schools or prisons and where they will be built; and which health care, reproductive rights, civil rights, and educational issues will be discussed and who defines the terms of these discussions. In other words, when we look at positions of power in the United States, we will almost always see members or representatives of the ruling class.

The next 19 percent of the economic pyramid, the professional and managerial class, are people who work for the ruling class. Members of this class may not gain the same level of power and financial rewards as people at the very top, but their work provides the research, managerial skills, expertise, technological development, and other resources that the ruling class needs to maintain and justify its monopolization of political and economic power. This class also carries out the direct management of the largest public, private, and nonprofit enterprises in the country.

But it is the majority of the population, the bottom 80 percent that produces the economic wealth benefiting those at the top. Laboring in factories, fields, classrooms, homes, sweatshops, prisons, hospitals, restaurants, and small businesses, the individuals comprising this enormous class keep our society functioning and productive. Meanwhile, entire communities remain

entrapped in endless cycles of competition, scarcity, violence, and insecurity from which those at the top are largely protected.

Certainly the gradations within the bottom 80 percent (middle class, working class, and the dependent and working poor) produce additional security and benefits for some of its members, specifically those in the middle class, those who are white, or male, or citizens, or not incarcerated, or straight, or able-bodied, and keep many of us blaming and attacking those like—or even worse off than—us, rather than looking to the economic system and the concentration of wealth at the top of the pyramid as the source of our problems. The role of many of our institutions is to keep our attention away from those in power and to manage and control our efforts to survive in the bottom of the pyramid. These functions are necessary to maintain the concentration of wealth and power because people have always resisted economic and political inequality and exploitation.

People on the bottom rungs of the pyramid are constantly organizing to gain more power and access to resources. As we have noted about target group activism in general, most of the progressive social change we have witnessed in U.S. history resulted from the work of disenfranchised groups of people who have fought for access to education, jobs, health care, civil rights, reproductive rights, safety, housing, and a safe, clean environment. In our recent history, we can point to the union, civil rights, women's, lesbian and gay, disability rights, and immigrants' rights movements, as well as thousands of local struggles for progressive social change.

I think that it is safe to say that all white people benefit some from racism, all men benefit some from sexism, but only those at the top of the pyramid truly gain from this system and enjoy privileges that most of us can only imagine.

Christianity has also played a key role in developing and justifying systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and genocide. European colonialism was given divine sanction through the edicts or bulls of popes at the beginning of the colonial period. For example, in 1455, the Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex*, allowed Christian rulers “free and ample faculty”

to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to [themselves] and [their] successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to [their] ... use and profit.

This was divine sanction for the colonization of the entire world, the reduction of heathens and infidels to slavery, and the justification of violence and genocide.

Racism also had its beginning in Christianity as the distinction between Christians and non-Christians took on a biological difference during the Inquisitions, when it was decided that Jews and Muslims who converted were false converts because they did not have clean blood (*limpieza de sangre*) because their parents and grandparents were not Christian. This was the beginning of modern or biological racism.

The discussion of racism can become very abstract very quickly, so I want to talk about challenging specific forms of white privilege built around issues of land, labor, reparations, education, housing, and war.

I want to ask you some questions and help us think about the implications to the answers to those questions.

For white people (people of color can choose whether or not to participate):



If you live on land that formerly belonged to Native Americans please stand up in silence. (If you cannot stand up, please raise your hand in silence to indicate your participation.) Thank you.

Whose land do you live on? What are the current struggles? Native Americans are struggling for land, sovereignty, protection of culture and sacred sites, environmental cleanup, protection, and sustainability. What do you know about, and how are you participating in, these struggles? If you are concerned about environmental justice, you should be acting from an awareness of these interconnections.

**What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?**

Please stand if the clothes you wear, the electronic devices you use, and most of the food you eat are produced by low-income people of color, primarily women, in this country and in other countries? Thank you.

Please stand if your ancestors were immigrants who took jobs in railroads, streetcars, construction, shipbuilding, wagon and coach driving, house painting, tailoring, longshore work, bricklaying, table waiting, working in the mills, furriering, dressmaking, or any other trade or occupation where people of color were driven out or excluded. Thank you.

In the current housing crisis we are witnessing the largest transfer of wealth from black communities to white hands in U.S. history, over \$200 billion so far.<sup>4</sup> Job, housing, benefits, and education losses are disproportionately affecting communities of color. Are you working for large-scale economic reform, the end of multinational corporate sovereignty and impunity? Are you working for safe and sustainable living-wage jobs? Are you involved in supporting workers' struggles in your city, on your campus, in your neighborhood? Martin Luther King Jr. was

organizing garbage workers here in Memphis when he was murdered because he knew the relationship between economics and race. What are you doing to support working-class struggles for racial and economic justice?

**What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?**

Please stand if you got to this conference using any form of transportation, public or private that relied on oil from the Middle East for fuel. Thank you.

Please stand if, this morning or any morning this week you have had coffee, tea, cocoa, bananas, or any other product grown in a country in which the United States has intervened militarily or with which it has otherwise economically or politically interfered in any way. Thank you.

We are completely dependent on U.S. imperialism and war to sustain our daily lives. Our sense of entitlement to the natural resources on other people's lands and our self-righteousness in killing them because they are in the way of our use of their natural resources is completely racist.

Do you know how many Iraqis have died in the current occupation? Do you use a racial lens when you critique our wars and interventions? Are you challenging not just this particular war, but the entire imperial mentality that justifies U.S. aggression based on others' lack of democracy, free markets, or human rights, or on our humanitarian intentions, or on perceived threats of communism, socialism, or terrorism? Antiwar work should be, but often isn't, antiracist work. How can you make it so?

**What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?**

Please stand if you went to or are going to a racially segregated school or a school in which white students were/are tracked into higher classes than students of color, students of

color were or are disciplined more harshly than white students, or in which the curriculum held or holds up white people as the heroes and builders of the United States and there was or is little mention of the contributions of people of color. Thank you.

Our school system has been set up, among other reasons, to perpetuate white supremacy and white privilege. So-called disparate outcomes are no accident. Students of color and low-income students in general do not drop out—they are pushed out. It is well documented that from preschool and early elementary school students of color, particularly African American, Latino, low-income Asian American, and Native American students receive clear messages that they are not wanted nor intended to succeed in our school system.

*Marked Boys*<sup>5</sup> by Ann Ferguson documents how, in elementary school African American boys are told directly and in more subtle ways that they are not wanted and they are not expected to succeed in school.

Are you working with others in your local community for educational equity? Are you supporting students and teachers who are organizing to address issues of equity? If you are a student or teacher, are you assessing racism in your institution and bringing those issues to public awareness?

### **What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?**

White privilege is based on concrete and specific forms of material benefit that every white person has access to, though in differing amounts. The point of understanding white benefits is to challenge white power. Our benefits lead us to understand how and in what ways to be engaged in social justice work.

Being an ally—it is not an identity, it is a practice. It is the way we live in the world on a daily basis, responding to the injustice around us in which we are implicated.

I don't want to underestimate how difficult it is to be an ally. As a white person the basic educational messages I received about people of color were that they were not smart, they were lazy, and besides, white people had done everything significant in history and therefore we should be in charge. If I walk into a situation and claim to be an ally, but I am carrying all of this misinformation, then I am going to be part of the problem, not part of the solution.

I also can't expect to be trusted just because I declare that I am an ally. People of color have had lots of experience with white people. Some of those experiences might have been good, some were probably bad, and some may have been horrible. They can't trust me just because I say I'm an ally. Trust grows over time as we work together and I establish credibility through my actions—and even then trust is not the issue—effective strategic partnership is.

Some guidelines for white allies to remember:

- Learn to see through a racial lens.
- Work with others.
- Be strategic.
- Look to leadership from communities of color.
- Be accountable.
- Get support.

Accountability to grass-roots, community-based organizations led by people of color is essential because of the insight and experience they bring to the struggle and because of the vulnerability they face when their allies mess up.

Some of the organizations I have been a part of in which accountability has been a critical issue have been the Oakland Men's Project and its relationships with women-led organizations; Angry White Guys, in relationship to people-of-color-led organizations; and Progressive Jewish Alliance, in relationship to worker-led movements.

The goal should always be systematic group and collective accountability to grassroots leadership of communities of color and other communities on the frontlines of struggle for social, political, and economic justice.

Some people think that being progressive is knowing about everything that is bad in the world. I think it is in knowing what is positive and fulfilling vision, providing models, and creating new alternatives. I look to the rest of the world for inspiration in this because some of the most exciting progressive developments are not happening here, in the center of a declining empire, but in other countries. I look to:

Venezuela—land reform and redistribution of wealth, neighborhood committees, recognition of women's unpaid labor, end of spanking.

Bolivia—land reform and redistribution of wealth to indigenous communities, the natural rights of the environment.

Cuba, Chiapas, and the Sandinistas, Oaxaca, villages in southern India, shop floors in South Korea, Vietnam, the list goes on.

Are you guided by fear or vision, desperation or possibility?

These are long-term struggles that we are engaged in. I work with an organization in the San Francisco Bay area called Generation Five. Its goal is to end child sexual assault within the next five generations—125 years. That is visionary, but it is also very grounded because it may very well take that long. Their work is to do what needs to be done to build a foundation that the next generation can build on.

Do you have a long-term vision? Does your current work move us towards that vision? If you keep doing what you are doing for the next 10, 15, 25 years, what difference will it make? What foundation are you building? How will your work provide a base for the next generation?

In closing, I want to read a poem by Jewish feminist poet Marge Piercy because it is inspiring and gets at the root of working for social justice. The poem is titled “The Long Road.”

### **The Long Road<sup>6</sup>**

What can they do to you?  
Whatever they want.  
They can set you up, they can bust you.  
They can break your fingers.  
They can burn your brain with electricity,  
Blur you with drugs til you can't walk, can't remember  
They can take your child, wall up your lover.

They can do anything you can't stop them from doing.  
How can you stop them?  
Alone you can fight, you can refuse,  
You can take what revenge you can,  
But they will roll over you.

But two people fighting back to back  
Can cut through a mob,

A snake-dancing file can break a cordon,  
And an army can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other sane,  
Can give support, conviction, love, massage, hope, sex.  
Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.

With four you can play bridge and start an organization.  
With six you can rent a whole house,  
Eat pie for dinner with no seconds,  
Hold a fundraising party.  
A dozen can make a demonstration.

(all join in) A hundred fill a hall.  
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;  
Ten thousand, power and your own paper;  
A hundred thousand, your own media;  
Ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,  
It starts when you care to act,  
It starts when you do it again after they said no.  
It starts when you say WE  
And know who you mean,  
And each day you mean one more.

There is no blueprint, no magic dust, no directions. We are guided by our collective vision. In the words of Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

*“Al andar se hace el camino.”*  
We make the road by walking.

I think that captures both the challenge and the joy of our journey together.

I want to end by restating the questions I began this talk with:

**What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?**

### Notes

1. Speech given at the White Privilege Conference 10, Memphis, Tennessee, April 2, 2009. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/us/>.
2. [pkivel@mindspring.com](mailto:pkivel@mindspring.com) or [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com).
3. Numbers are from 2007 from Wolff, E. N. (2010). Recent trends in household wealth in the United States: Rising debt and middle-class squeeze, an update to 2007. Jerome Levy Economics Institute Working Paper #589, March, 2010. Available at [http://www.levy.org/pubs/wp\\_589.pdf](http://www.levy.org/pubs/wp_589.pdf).

4. Rivera, A. *Foreclosed: State of the dream* 2008. Boston: United for a Fair Economy, 2008. Available at [http://www.faireconomy.org/files/StateOfDream\\_01\\_16\\_08\\_Web.pdf](http://www.faireconomy.org/files/StateOfDream_01_16_08_Web.pdf).
5. Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
6. From Piercy, M. (1980). *The moon is always female*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.