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White privilege knapsack resurfaces after Trayvon Martin's death

by Kate Childs Graham

Young Voices

A day after news broke of Trayvon Martin's death, I was walking to the bus. On my way, I passed a neighbor. It was drizzling so we both had our hoodies up. The striking difference, though, is that my neighbor is a young black man, and I'm not.

The moment literally stopped me in my tracks, stopped me in the cloud of obliviousness that creeps up when my privilege goes unchecked for too long.

As a white person, I have unearned advantages, what Peggy McIntosh called an "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day." These advantages make it easier for me to move in this world, to go about my day.

Here's a typical day for me:

When I wake up and check the news, there are almost always people of my race pictured on the front page, and most of the journalists are similarly white.

On my way to the bus stop, if it is drizzling outside, I can put my hoodie up or even run quickly down the street without raising suspicion.

When I get to the bus stop, the people and occasional police officer don't look me up and down. I am able to stand there, relatively unnoticed, as I listen to music performed by people who -- for the most part -- look like me.

If I happened to forget my SmarTrip card, I know that the bus driver won't assume I'm a freeloader and will let me ride for free.

When I get to work, many of my managers are of my race.

At lunchtime, there are plenty of options to satisfy my white taste buds, and even the so-called "ethnic" options have been tweaked for my benefit.

If I go to Mass after work, I can be sure that the music reflects my culture and the priest will most likely have my skin color.

When I get off the bus and walk home, the person in front of me never turns around to keep tabs on me.

If I run to the local market, I know that the cashier won't presume I will pay with food stamps because of my race.

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And when I put my baby boy to bed at night, gazing at him lovingly, I never have to worry about when the time will come from us to have a conversation about the racism he will experience when he's older.

I grew up in a small town in Indiana. There were only a few people of color in my high school's graduating class. While racism certainly bubbled under the surface of conversations about property values and "that side of town," I had no idea what it meant to be white, much less what it meant to have white privilege.

When I was first introduced to the concept a few years back, I was defensive. I denied it. Sure, I'm white, and that gives me some privilege, but don't the oppressions I face as a lesbian and a woman cancel out any white privilege?

They don't.

Yes, my experience as a lesbian and a woman is different, sometimes harder than that of a white straight man. But at the end of the day, I'm still white. I still have that unearned, completely arbitrary power.

After I got over being defensive and stopped denying my privilege, I became frustrated. I carry around this invisible knapsack. I am so aware of my privilege that it is, at times, blinding. And, yet, I can't lose that knapsack. I can't change my race.

Then, I recalled the words of Peggy McIntosh, who said, "[I]t is an open question whether we will choose

to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base."

I can use those unearned advantages, that undeserved power to change what Dorothy Day (might have) called the "filthy rotten system." To do that, though, I must make sure that the cloud of obliviousness dissipates, that I never need a heinous killing to shake me out of my unconsciousness. Only if I remain aware of my white privilege can I use my power to help create a world where no parent need worry about the racism their child will experience.

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