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## Drowning in White Whine

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# Drowning in White Whine

## **Abstract**

“What are some examples of white privilege?” my professor asked.

I felt an audible tension in the class as this was asked. This is a tricky subject, especially when you’re talking to a class full of mostly white, privileged people (myself included). [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, white privilege, history, slavery, oppression

## **Disciplines**

Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

## DROWNING IN WHITE WHINE

November 3, 2015

“What are some examples of white privilege?” my professor asked.



I felt an audible tension in the class as this was asked. This is a tricky subject, especially when you’re talking to a class full of mostly white, privileged people (myself included).

Immediately a hand flew up behind me; it belonged to a white male who rarely speaks up. I felt the anger rising in his voice, the widening of his eyes, and saw the tint of redness in his face as he said: “I don’t know, but I do know a disadvantage.”

I held my breath.

The boy went on to talk about affirmative action policies, and how “everyone should be equal” and that we shouldn’t have to identify our race on college applications; “it should be left blank,” he said. “That’s only fair.”

I’ve seen this anger before. I’ve seen this defensiveness. I’ve seen people who never speak up shout out in class, taking this one topic to heart.

White privilege is undeniable. It is a package of unearned benefits given to white people at birth as a result of years of using racism and discrimination as tools to keep possession of social, cultural, ideological, and economic power. The United States was founded on slavery and oppression which continues through inequitable and unjust practices and policies in all institutions: [housing](#), [income](#), the [judicial system](#), the [prison system](#), [education](#), [health care](#), etc.

For me, this has played out in significant ways: I was able to go to one of the best public schools in my state because my parents easily got a loan and mortgage for a house in that neighborhood. Going to this

school gave me the skills necessary to get into Gettysburg College, which is now offering me even more opportunities. I've had family members get in trouble with the law, but they were able to avoid jail and they weren't seen as criminals or as dangerous. They were never called "thugs," but kids who "made mistakes" and their poor decisions didn't damage their future.

The unearned benefits of white privilege are also experienced on our campus, often in ways that are invisible to white students and faculty. For example, I have never been the only person of my race in a class. I have never been asked to speak on behalf of my entire race in a class. I have never been treated disrespectfully or cruelly at a frat due to my race; I have never been kicked out of a frat because of my race; I never had to wonder if I wasn't let into/was kicked out of/treated badly at a frat because of my race. No one has ever questioned how I got into this school (such as through affirmative action policies).

Yet, we – white people – don't want to acknowledge our privilege. We need to question why that is the case. We may feel threatened by evidence of white privilege so we try to defend ourselves: we have had struggles, we work diligently, life has not been easy for us; we succeeded despite these obstacles. We'd like to think that everything we have is due to our hard work, our ambition, our dedication.

So, we use individual examples of struggle to say that white privilege doesn't exist. *I work hard in my classes, I pull all-nighters, I have a job, I paid for my old car.* But everyone has hardships; we must see that our personal hardships are beside the point and that personal hardships do not disprove white privilege, nor does white privilege dismiss the hard work we've done or the accomplishments we've made. Instead it is saying this: we've started with a jump ahead of other people. Yes we've worked hard and encountered struggles, but we still had that jump start, and that helped us on our path to success.

Perhaps we are not all defensive; some of us feel guilty. We are aware of the benefits whites had and continue to have; we feel guilty that we were born into this legacy of discrimination and racism. We've benefitted from a system that was constructed to give us an advantage while holding others back. Everyone fooled us: our teachers, our parents, our favorite TV shows. We fell for it.

We also don't want to deal with these feelings or we don't know how to- so we deflect them. We ignore the fact that others experience more hardships than us. We reassure ourselves that we're not like "those" white people: we have black friends, there are some black people in our sorority/fraternity (we accept diversity!), we've signed a pledge of inclusion, we don't use racially charged words as a joke. So we go about our lives ignoring that the existence of race is still a daily source of discrimination. This is the easy option because as whites we can ignore race and suffer no consequences. But, by doing this we are reinforcing inequality by not acknowledging it and not trying to change it. We avoid responsibility.

I see these attitudes and behaviors as a consequence of our culture. The mantra of our country is "if you work hard, you'll get ahead." Thus, if you aren't ahead, you aren't working hard enough and that's that. It's hard for white people to see that being successful is due to anything but individual accomplishment. When told that we have white privilege, we feel that it is an attack on who we are, on what we've been taught to believe about ourselves. It isn't our fault that we've believed what we've been taught; it is our fault, however, if we continually deny our privilege despite much evidence that we have it because of our skin color.

Perhaps the wording of “white privilege” has become too loaded of a phrase and causes the real meaning of it to be lost on many. But to acknowledge white privilege is to see the great injustice of our society. To acknowledge this privilege is not to point fingers and make people feel guilty or unworthy of what they have. The first step in fighting oppression is naming it. Then changing it.

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