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## On White Guilt.

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# On White Guilt.

## **Abstract**

I didn't always realize what white guilt was, only that it existed. It's not as cut-and-dry as it seems. It actually took me years to understand it, which is why I was not surprised when at the Town Hall Meeting back in January, one person asked a question about how to be an ally. Specifically, I found myself reflecting on her concerns regarding "white guilt" (44:01 – 45:25). I wanted to respond, but from the audience it felt out of place, and as it is, my response took two months of putting my thoughts together. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, allyship, Binary, Black Lives Matter, discrimination, George Zimmerman, Gettysburg College, police brutality, poverty, Privilege, Race, racism, Segregation, Social Justice, Trayvon Martin, violence, white guilt, White Privilege

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Ethnic Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology of Culture

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](https://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

## ON WHITE GUILT.

March 30, 2016

I didn't always realize what white guilt was, only that it existed. It's not as cut-and-dry as it seems. It actually took me years to understand it, which is why I was unsurprised when at the Town Hall Meeting back in January, one person asked a question about how to be an ally. Specifically, I found myself reflecting on [her concerns regarding "white guilt"](#) (44:01 – 45:25). I wanted to respond, but from the audience it felt out of place, and as it is, my response took two months of putting my thoughts together.



Questions aside about whether one should call themselves an [ally](#), white guilt is very complicated. At its most basic definition, white guilt is the feeling of guilt resulting from the recognition of unequal, racist and harmful treatment inflicted upon certain groups by white people both historically and presently. The guilt can be in response to personal actions (or inactions), to family members' actions, to a cultural past, or a variety of other [interpersonal, institutional or systemic realities](#). Sometimes it is not even guilt: it's anger, betrayal or grief. However, I have always heard the term "white guilt" applied primarily to its extreme form: a crippling guilt that borders upon self-loathing, the type that makes you hate your own skin.

This extreme form is not healthy for the individual and, quite honestly, no form of white guilt is productive for either the self or the community. It may appear useful because it illustrates a recognition of privilege, but in reality it leaves you crippled and unable to take positive action. It's like ill-fitting dress shoes: you wear them because they are all you have, but they hurt your feet so much that you can't even walk. You're aware that there is a problem, but feel unable to make change.

Have I fallen for white guilt? Yes, I have, many times, and I will fall for it again. In some ways, it is a natural part of recognizing my place and privilege in society as it currently stands. It is not enough to tell someone that their guilt is pulling attention away from racial issues. You need to show them that it has toxic effects on themselves and others. For me, when I was told my guilt was a distraction from the real issue of racial injustice, I only felt guiltier about feeling guilty. I was still as paralyzed as before, still as

incapable of taking action, still unable to walk in my uncomfortable shoes. It wasn't until I started to investigate the problems with white guilt that I was able to make positive change.

Consider a few problems related to white guilt:

1. White guilt is a white construction perpetuated by white "allies".

Every time I start to feel "white guilt," I look to see who is encouraging it and why. Almost every time it is a white "ally" trying to prove how good of an ally they are. I recognized it first with a [video](#) about how we, white people, should consider ourselves closer to George Zimmerman than to Trayvon Martin. While I now better understand the intention, because the video came across as a promotion of white guilt (you could have been a murderer!), my first reaction was self-loathing for my white skin, which selfishly took my attention away from the actual issues: the murder of a child and the systemic racism that condones it. In moderation guilt can be motivating, but too much can be debilitating instead. It leads to despair rather than determination to improve things.

2. White guilt is attached to an impossible standard.

Why do we feel guilty? It's because we create a binary: either you're an ardent supporter of Black Lives Matter or you're a racist pig-dog. The truth is that we're all on a constantly-changing scale and we all make mistakes or have bad habits that take training to undo. Some are hard to recognize until you or someone else with the same bad habit is called out.

Everyone has room for growth. No one starts freshman year thinking they can get their doctorate the next day; nor should people start learning about white privilege with the idea that the next day they will have a 20/20 view of racial justice issues.

3. White guilt supports racial segregation.

White guilt is generalizing. Suddenly you aren't you anymore – you are only your white skin. On the one hand, it gives you a greater understanding about what it's like to be seen only by skin color. On the other hand, it can influence you to start thinking of people as generalizations – this perpetuates the binary mentioned earlier. You end up in danger of thinking "They're x, so they see me as y." It isn't an acknowledgment. It's a mind trap that limits your ability to see people as individuals and instead, it continues to make you see people merely by their race, which is the basis of racism.

Falling into the guilt trap does not mean you're a bad person. It means you fell into a trap and have to get yourself out of it. It takes mental retraining to break yourself of bad habits, but once they're broken, you will recognize them and can avoid falling back into them.

4. White guilt is not a recognition of current problems.

The past few centuries have been ugly, and we need to recognize that, but it is more important to focus on current issues like [white privilege](#), [standards of living](#) and [police brutality](#). Guilt puts the attention on past failures, so it puts the issues in the past, stealing attention from current issues. However, matters of

poverty, violence and injustice need to be considered in the present. They're happening now and can still be changed.

**Instead of feeling guilty, think instead of what can still be changed and how you can assist movements in progress. Think of it as goals. Guilt puts us in the past; goals turns our attention, rightfully, to the future.**

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