

I have a brother, four years younger than me. We lived together as brothers in our family until I was eight years old. For reasons that are complex and irrelevant to this story, we were raised in different households for the subsequent ten years.

From his birth and until the time we parted, my brother and I lived in a suburb of Edmonton called Sherwood Park. I was originally born in Port Moody and returned there in grade three, leaving my brother in Alberta. A few years later, he was moved to rural BC. There were considerable differences in our childhood experiences, not the least of which was the degree of shelter from the world under which we each lived. My upbringing was worldly, and led with tolerance and an open mind.

During our time apart, each with a different parent, we did spend some holidays together. One occasion in particular comes to mind as I think about the subjects of race, prejudice, and racism.

It was Spring Break, and my brother had come to Port Moody. As was often the case, my mother would plan something special while he was with us. This time it was a train trip to Seattle along with my aunt and cousin, with a couple nights in a hotel near the Space Needle. Because I'd never been to Seattle before, I was excited – we all were.

It was our second day, and we'd spent the morning walking around the city near our hotel. It was time for lunch. Mom spotted a diner, and in we went. My cousin and I walked straight in, looking for a table. I turned around at an empty table, expecting everyone to be gathered right behind me, but there

was only my cousin. My brother, my mom, and my aunt were still in the doorway of the diner, and my brother had a look of concern on his face.

I was hungry, so called after them to come and sit down. That didn't happen. Instead, my mom called *me* to join *them* in leaving – we would find another place to eat. Hungry, confused, and impatient, I left with them and complained loudly. *What was the problem?* My mom couldn't tell me exactly, only to say my little brother wanted to eat somewhere else. It would take some time for the source of my brother's unease to surface, but when it did, I remember feeling both shocked and superior. Seated in the diner, both at tables and the bar, had been a number of Black customers – this scared him. I was shocked by my brother's apparent prejudice, and smug about my own apparent lack of it. It was 1978.

In a blink, it was 1988 and I left my worldly existence in Vancouver for small town British Columbia. I began my teaching career in a small northern community. The student population mirrored the town's, with roughly a three-way division of Indigenous, Indo-Canadian, and European students. Many times during my first year in this community, I found myself thinking about my brother's behaviour in Seattle and feeling less smug, recognizing shameful stirrings in myself. I struggled to reconcile this dissonance: racists were offensive, hurling ugly language and physically oppressing people of colour. Racism was the jokes that were told with bluster and stereotypical punchlines, like those some of my family liked to tell. *How could I be racist?* I was on Rodney King's

It Is My Privilege...

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side during the riots in Los Angeles. Without the vocabulary to describe it, I was rationalizing my exceptionality.

Today, with some vocabulary, I can begin to understand and recognize my behaviour.

I'm privileged, and I've lived a privileged life. Try telling that to my mother, though. We were not affluent. I had a teen-mother, married very young, with three kids and a divorce before she turned 23, and I grew up in a string of rentals and a double-wide near the Coquitlam River. I babysat a lot while she worked two jobs. Mom would argue that I rose from disadvantage, not privilege.

My mother would point to the challenges in my life, thus providing examples of the assumptions which underly the concept of *White Fragility* as discussed by Robin DiAngelo. My mother would argue that I achieved my position through hard work and determination, and that no one gave me a hand up or a handout. At the core of her argument would be the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy: I am the master of my own destiny, and I got everything my hard work deserved. Although anyone who has ever adjudicated my application, favoured me in a job interview, appointed me to a committee, approved my loan, or cast a ballot in my name would not likely attribute their decision to my race, it is clear: my skin did not pose an obstacle. How could it, when the world I move through is shaped and influenced by those who are of my colour? I benefit, and it has nothing to do with my intentions or whether I participate in overt acts of racial discrimination. To paraphrase DiAngelo, I could have the purest of hearts and completely accept people of colour, yet

I would still experience the benefits of my colour, whether I liked it or not.

DiAngelo writes of the American experience, citing that greater than 90% of those in positions of authority and exceptional wealth are white. Greater than 90% of those who will decide programming on network television and the publication of music and books is white. Canadian numbers will be different. One report of the 2019 federal election results suggests an increase in the number of visible minorities among national leaders over the previous election; however, the representation is not yet proportionally aligned with our Canadian population. And this privilege – that which my

mother would object to – relies on the continued dominance of white people in positions of authority who retain control over institutions, and decide what to print, publish, and teach.

As I write this, I take in my surroundings

and circumstances: even my mother would have to acknowledge that I am living a remarkably privileged life. Do I enjoy that I live a privileged life? There is only one honest response to this question: yes. Am I comfortable with this privilege when I square up and face it? No, nor am I entitled to a level of comfort when confronting racial prejudice and racism. To avoid this discomfort is to reinforce racism by preventing it from being challenged, examined, and addressed. Two conversations I had in July of 2020 have led me to conclude that I should think on what is to be done *with* my privilege rather than what is to be done *about* it.

The first conversation was by invitation of the Minister of Education at the time, Rob Fleming:

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the Anti-Racism Community Roundtable. The second conversation was with Dr. Mark Edwards, a long-time friend and partner of the BCPVPA. Both conversations charged me to reflect upon the platform I have been given and how I may best use it to challenge and reject not only racial prejudice, but also systematic racism. Of course, I first have to understand the distinction and begin that learning. I am responsible for my own education, and I am grateful to colleagues in SD 42 and SD 39 who have welcomed me to participate and learn alongside them. My first session with the Maple Ridge Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (MRPVPA) Chapter took me full circle to reflect upon family, and my own action ... or inaction.

An exercise shared among the MRPVPA group in early December 2020 was a cultural competence self-assessment. After completing the assessment, I found myself returning to,

and reconsidering, the fourth statement: "I do not participate in jokes that are derogatory to any individual group." It was the verb in this statement that gave me pause and a fair degree of discomfort, more so for my personal life than my professional life. Many times have I been among family and experienced their racial prejudice through jokes or offensive statements, and too frequently have I 'participated'. To leave their company in silence is to be complicit: this is participation. If I accept this definition, then I must acknowledge my role in perpetuating racial prejudice. There was nothing *anti-racist* in my response.

I have been an educator for more than thirty years, yet I am only beginning to learn and understand racism in our society. In my role as President of the

BCPVPA, I have been granted a platform to share thoughts and ideas – and perhaps, even influence them – for only a short time. I now understand that being anti-racist is not a passive philosophy but a choice I make, through my decisions and my actions on a personal level, to speak out and speak up when I see harm on a community level. It is giving voice to what is right and advocacy for changes which need to be made on a systemic and institutional level. I see so much action taking place in schools, much of it led by youth, and it gives me hope and inspiration. Like any belief or commitment, it will require intention to make a difference, to recognize and create opportunities and to listen.

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More than forty years ago, I silently judged my brother. More than thirty years ago, I was disturbed by my own thoughts. And I have wrapped this commentary around a story of my family so that I may ground it in *my* lived experience. In our schools, our offices, our homes,

and communities, we have all – literally, all of us – experienced moments when words or actions of someone close to us evoke shock, alarm, or shame: casual comments of stereotypical prejudice, the snubs, the jokes and cruelty. My starting point has been educating myself, beginning to speak out in my role, and ensuring that others have voice. I have many roles in this life – brother, son, nephew, father – and in these roles I might find the greatest challenge to speak with the voice of an anti-racist. But it's about time.



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