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Lessons In Injustice: Privilege Walks

Karen Silverman

If you are a white male take one step forward. If your parents did not grow up in the United States take a step back. If you were born in the United States take a step forward. These are some of the questions one might hear at a Privilege Walk, which is an activity held at many universities in order to “provide participants with an opportunity to understand the intricacies of privilege.”¹ Questions such as these are asked to participating students who stand shoulder to shoulder in a straight line. Students take steps forward when their answers to questions indicate that they have received a perceived advantage. They take steps back when they affirm that they grew up with hardships and face discrimination. By the end, the students in the front of the room are there because they are supposedly more privileged than the students behind them.

The activity comes with a disclaimer; it is not meant to make any participants feel guilty for being one of those in the front of the room once it is over. Yet, what is the position of the student who is in the front of the room supposed to represent? When one thinks of success, expressions that come to mind are “on top of the game” and “ahead of the field.” Expressions that are not associated with success and achievement are “at the back of the pack” and “behind the curve.” There is a clear connection then between the physical position towards the front of the group and expressions that represent success. If being towards the front of the group of students is a metaphor for being closer to success, then in the context of the activity the means to which one gets there is by superficial circumstances of privilege.

Therefore, despite the disclaimer, this activity seems to indicate that success is dependent on privilege. The questions address only the superficial and non-volitional aspects of a man’s life. They deal with race, geographic background and ancestry. What the activity does not consider to be factors of success are for instance how much time one spends doing homework during the week, how much time they spend partying, or any other volitional activities for that matter. The consequence of only dealing

1 Tira J. Young, “The Privilege Walk Workshop: Learning More about Privilege in Today’s Society,” Azusa Pacific University, Diversity Workshop, 2006.

with the un-chosen factors of man's life is that participants are led to believe that their success or failure is dependent on privileges that they had no control over. The ultimate, and flawed, lesson being taught is that good luck is essentially equivalent to success.

Luck is defined as the events or circumstances that operate for or against an individual. These events are neither in the individual's control nor caused by their choices. Since moral judgments can only be made in regard to man's choices, they should not be applied to the circumstances that make him privileged. Good luck is not the force that drives a man to design and build a skyscraper, or the man who starts his own business. In the same way, bad luck is not what causes a man to become a criminal. Luck can only bring about circumstances, whether good or bad, that men can either utilize or throw away—and this comes down to free will. A man who is truly not capable of success will not thrive even with opportunities handed to him. A man who is truly capable of success will, if he so chooses, create his own opportunities.

In today's culture, luck is attributed to success too highly and too often. Even the most successful individuals make this irrational claim. Warren Buffet, for example, contributes all of his success to pure luck: "And so here I am, by pure, pure luck, born at the right time, the right gender as it turned out, compared to my sisters who were just as smart or smarter than I am, in the right place and in a system where allocating capital pays off like crazy."² Millions of others were also "born at the right time" and of "the right gender," but that was not a guarantee of success for them or for Mr. Buffett.

It is astounding to think that a man who had to have put in so much work, effort, and ingenuity for his success is attributing it all to chance. The best explanation for such an attitude is given by philosopher Ayn Rand who says that the successful men who claim that luck was involved are either a "modest, concrete-bound repressor who does not understand the issue—or an appeaser who tries to mollify the resentment of envious mediocrities."³

Even before a man achieves success, he is harshly judged for advantageous opportunities that cannot and do not guarantee his success;

2 Don Watkins, Buffett vs. Carnegie and Rand: The Role of Luck In Success," *Laissez Faire: The Uncompromised Case for Capitalism*, January 14, 2013.

3 *Ibid.*

and such judgment is irrational. To judge is “to evaluate a given concrete in reference to an abstract principle or standard.”⁴ Judgment requires specific processes of thought. Take for example buying a car. For a man to judge which car he should buy, he evaluates his options, measuring which car best fits his standards. He does not choose the first car he sees in the lot. He passes judgment instead of acting on whims. Now if the man’s wife were to evaluate his choice of car, she would also be passing judgment.

To judge someone based on his choices and actions is to pass moral judgment—to praise or blame the actions of others is to judge their moral character. One blames the criminal who robs a home, and praises the man who catches him. Their actions reflect the values they have chosen, and their values discern their moral code. Morality therefore pertains to the realm of choice. Where a man is born, and the family he is born into, are not in his power to choose, and therefore are not in the realm of morality.

It is popular these days to say that it is unfair or unjust that some people are born into an affluent family and presented advantages that a man born into poverty does not have. The terms unfair and unjust are misused in reference to the privileges being discussed because they are not in the sphere of such moral evaluation. Such situations mean that not everyone starts out on equal footing, but this “unfairness” does not warrant the moral evaluation of the recipients who have, in fact, not chosen their start. It is also “unfair” that, by their definition, some people are born with the capacity for musical talent or genius, but that does not mean we morally denigrate Aretha Franklin or Albert Einstein.

Still, some believe that simply being born with an impeccable singing voice or a better brain are unfair advantages. They also have the desire to even the playing field and instill fairness. Any actions taken to forcibly make things even are, in fact, choices that can be morally judged and should be judged harshly. For example if two men take the same precautions against acquiring a contagious disease, but one man gets it and the other does not, it is not unjust. What is unjust is to purposefully infect the healthy man with the disease to make things even. And this is not a straw-man argument. Observe the fact that schools adjust their curriculum, standards, and pace to the lowest common denominator in the name

4 Ayn Rand, “How Does One Lead A Rational life In An Irrational Society,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 72.

of “fairness.” It is the worst students that end up setting the precedent for the rest of the student body, with the highest expense paid by the best and brightest students. Just as the healthy man is crippled with a disease, the best and brightest children are mentally crippled in the name of evening the playing field.

One of the reflection questions the organizers ask students to answer is what can they do with this information in the future. If one accepted the fact that luck is not the cause of success, and privilege should not be morally evaluated, then there would not be anything to do with this information except to realize that success has to be and can be earned no matter what the circumstances are. Unfortunately, if any lesson is encouraged, it is to be a promoter of social justice—to be willing to even the playing field no matter what that might entail.

Instead, schools should hold an activity in which students stepped forward for having a good work ethic and backwards for neglecting their opportunities. Then if one happened to be towards the back of the pack, the lesson would be, “Get your act together!” Or maybe the Privilege Walk can remain as is, but at the end the organizers would say “Guess what? Where you’re standing doesn’t matter! If you work hard enough you can achieve the success you desire.”