

## PRIVILEGE

Following is a Facebook message from my son about his experience growing up with privilege, his privileged classmates, his expanding world, and a marvelous African American engineering professor and his marvelous message which has inspired my son. John

*In grade school I learned Abe Lincoln made sure there would be no more slavery and Americans would always treat each other fairly. Good job us, I thought.*

*Sometime around middle school someone had a giant flashlight, 4 D-cell batteries, a good foot long. A grownup called it a Rodney King flashlight, someone else laughed (11 skull fractures); it was a joke. I didn't get the reference. Funny what sticks in your memory.*

*In high school I would get frustrated searching for scholarship applications that weren't for underrepresented (did I know that word yet?) minorities. There were special months for black history, women's history, native American history. They said the other 11 months (didn't they mean all 12?) were white history; maybe but that didn't hit home. Some kids joked about making a club they'd call WAM, for White something Males (a special club? try the whole world, welcome at birth), maybe it was Anglo, or American, I can't remember, and they'd laugh.*

*Things started not to line up. Abe hadn't fixed everything. Things were askitter, off-kilter, a-skilter.*

*I met the first person I knew was a different religion in middle school. He was Sikh, and wore a turban (patka). I made my first black friend in high school. She called me her big brother, taught me black hair is different (why assume it was the same?), you can't shampoo it all the time like white hair. I met the first people I knew who were gay (in high school, in 1999 – so brave), which they said was bad in church.*

*I went to live in a dorm with what seemed like every color people (still mostly white though). So many more black people than high school, every shade of black. There wasn't just a black culture, but black cultures, plural. Why was diversity such an emphasis (why not)? There were constant protests over affirmative action blocking the diag (by any means necessary? how desperate they must feel). I mostly studied. I was trying to pay for school with good grades. My favorite class was a black professor's (how different was his road than my other professors'? than mine?). He set my career in motion.*

*I came back for grad school to study in his lab. Half our lab were black, women, or underrepresented (that word again – was that unusual?). They taught me to be a scientist, helped me graduate. There were so many undergrads eager to work in our lab, many from HBCUs and MIs (what a strange coincidence). I learned to try to mentor those behind me (never done learning that), to give what I'd been given, to give a hand up (how many hands up had I been given?). Years later, my advisor told me to “use my privilege honorably.”*

*Privilege. That word feels uncomfortable (oh poor thing to feel “uncomfortable”). All a-skilter. Privileges are things you get, bonuses, treats, cherries on top. Extras. How can privileges be things you don't get?*

*No one stopped my parents from buying the house they wanted in 1973  
I grew up never afraid of the police  
I grew up never worrying I'd be safe on the way to school, or at school, or at home  
on my porch  
I grew up never hungry  
I sent out resumes never worrying if my name would filter me out  
I go for walks in my neighborhood and never worry about getting stopped  
I never have to take my kids when I leave the house to look nonthreatening  
I wore a hooded sweatshirt today without a second thought  
I was pulled over at 21 years old going 88 mph in Iowa with out-of-state plates and I  
(didn't get jailed, beaten, searched; didn't have a knee on my neck for 10 minutes  
choking the life out of me; didn't beg for my breath, my life, my mother; didn't wet  
myself as I died while people watched and pleaded on the side of the road; didn't  
leave my family and friends behind to mourn and rage over my murder) only got a  
10-over ticket and sent on my way*

*Privilege doesn't just come in recognizable shapes. It doesn't have to come at all.  
Sometimes the privilege is that it doesn't. It's uncomfortable.*

*Use your privilege honorably.*

*Good advice. Love each other. Be kind.*

Michael McDonald