

Vision, Privilege and the Limits of Tolerance

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Three presumptions about the dominant culture--innocence, worthiness and competence--perpetuate privileges for this cultural group, which often go unnoticed by members of the culture. This article provides a list of rules that the author uses to combat the white privileges.

It is not unusual, when the subject is diversity that the persons asked to come forward to tell their stories are asked because they are seen as the targets of discrimination. Over and over again, we ask these people to come forward, and over and over again they lay out their pain, their anger, and their frustration. And when it is all over, we ask them to do it again. We may listen, but apparently we do not hear. Perhaps what we hear is a series of stories that seem isolated incidents that do not necessarily form a pattern and are certainly not evidence of institutional discrimination.

Over the years I have heard many people from non-dominant groups suggest that it would be very helpful if persons who belong to the dominant culture in the United States would take the time to consider what it means to be a member of the dominant group. Then they could consider how their life experiences might be different if their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, or disability placed them outside the privileged norm. So I write here about my own experiences as a white, heterosexual female and well-educated, upper-middle-class babyboomer who is currently able-bodied.

I use these words as some of my identifiers because I want to talk first about dominant culture privilege in the United States and how it benefits me and others with similar identifiers. Privileges that we enjoy that are unearned but nonetheless function every day to help us "make it through the day" are difficult to talk about and even more difficult to hear about. We want to believe that our intelligence and our effort *alone* are responsible for what we achieve, as if life were a monopoly game where we all start out with the same amount of money, and we all have to take our chances with the rolls of the dice.

Yet I believe that if we do not make an effort to understand how the larger culture honors some and not others, gives some and not others the benefit of the doubt, accepts some at face value while asking others to prove their worth, then we are operating in ignorance of some very powerful forces, and that is dangerous for all of us.

Dr. Frances Kendall, author of *Diversity in the Classroom: New Approaches to the Education of Young Children* (1996), has written in an unpublished paper about the difficulties that persons with dominant culture privilege experience when they try to listen and hear how their privileges and their experiences differ from those of members of non-dominant racial groups:

Many well-meaning, committed White people are not able to sit with the pain and anger of people of color. We feel powerless to do anything about it, and don't want to face the fact that we are benefiting from our whiteness at the same time that our colleagues of color are being systemically excluded.

How can we make dominant culture privileges and their consequences visible and understandable to others?

I want to talk about what I see as three of the principle assumptions or presumptions that are made about me when I am operating in a place and time that accords me dominant culture privilege, and how these presumptions operate in such a way to lead others to accept me while they merely tolerate others. I also want to suggest some ways in which we can challenge our own thinking about ourselves, our colleagues, and our students, with an eye toward opening up possibilities for inclusion and respect. This, I believe, is the real work--the life work--of any of us that are determined to work for justice. It is not just by passing laws or striking them down that we make a difference; it is not by demonstrating, giving to causes, and voting with our conscience. I believe we must live an "examined life": acting consciously to examine how we think about, how we hear, and how we act toward others.

Douglas Adams, one of my favorite philosophers, although probably known to more of you as the author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1995), pointed to our facility for ignoring certain social truths when he wrote:

It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion about them. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever. (Adams, 1987, p. 4)

In order to illustrate the way I think dominant culture privilege can be invisible, I invite you to picture the neighborhood where I live in Oregon. The area is roughly 30 minutes, by freeway, from downtown Portland, and was, until about ten years ago, primarily farmland. It was about ten years ago that my partner and I accepted an invitation from friends to move into a guesthouse on property they had just purchased in this area. As I was beginning a doctoral program, and my partner was just beginning a new career as a software engineer, relocating to a small house in the woods with cheap rent seemed an ideal move. We have stayed there ever since, taking advantage of the benefits of what has become a very economically upscale area without, so far, having to pay the usual economic costs.

In order to understand what has happened to this area, you need to know that land zoning dictates that you must have six acres to build a house. The land is hilly. On one particular hill, about a dozen homes have been built and all are clustered together on top of the hill, facing a surrounding valley. Each home's "six acres" is a pie-shaped wedge down the side of the hill. The "front" of each of these houses is the one facing the valley, with the panoramic view of all the other houses on other hills. The "back" of each house would be the side that faces the street.

One day, Michael and I were driving for exploration, and we decided to travel to the top of this hill to see what these houses looked like from the back, so to speak. As we approached the circle drive on which these homes are located, we were amazed to find that the homes had almost no windows facing the street! Each home had large windows in the front of the house that overlooked the valley, but they had almost no view from the back of the house that would lead them to see their neighbors, or anyone traveling up and down their street. From the point of view of someone in the house, she or he would look out onto the valley, and see other houses with other beautiful views like theirs. In some ways, I believe that the view from the dominant culture works a little like this. It is easy to see yourself in company with others like yourself. It is easy to believe by looking out your largest "windows" on the world, that everyone else has the same advantages you do. It is easy to ignore the little windows in the back of the house, and the voices that may intrude upon you from time to time, telling you that not everyone shares your panorama.

I am reminded of a cartoon in the *Doonesbury* comic strip in the days of an earlier presidential administration. The president is being told by one of his advisors that his new tax plan is being criticized because it gives the most advantages to those making \$200,000 a year or more. The president says something like, "Well, almost everyone makes \$200,000 or more, don't they?" And when his advisors look at him and do not immediately respond, he says, "Well, at least, most of the people we know do."

From inside a house of privilege, it is easy to believe, just by looking around you, that pretty much everyone has the same privileges you do. It is also easy to shut out those noises from the street that speak about others and their different experiences.

So, keeping in mind the view from the top of the hill, I want to talk about three of the assumptions--or what I prefer to call presumptions--that come with the view: the presumption of *innocence*, the presumption of *worthiness*, and the presumption of *competence*.

The First Presumption: Innocence

I know that I have dominant culture privilege because I get the presumption of innocence. When something goes wrong around me, people do not look to me first, or even second, as a probable cause of the problem.

The presumption of innocence can also be given me even when it appears I have done something wrong. For instance, over the holidays, I visited children, grandchildren, and other family in Chicago. My sister-in-law and I were shopping, the week before Christmas, in the Marshall Field department store. As we left with bags full of purchases, we set off the alarm at one of the exit doors. We were called back into the store by two young women. It took five minutes for these women to locate the item with the alarm tag still affixed. During this time, I am certain the two saleswomen were more uncomfortable than we were. They apologized several times for detaining us, and when they finally found the item in my sister-in-law's bag that set off the alarm, they removed the alarm tag and thanked us for our cooperation; they did not even ask

to see the receipt, although my sister-in law offered to show it to them. I was reminded of the incident that occurred just a few months before this when a young Black man was asked to remove his shirt and leave an Eddie Bauer store without it because he had been suspected, with no evidence at all to back up the suspicion of shoplifting. I could not imagine such a thing ever happening to me--not at this age and, for that matter, not at any age. Almost everywhere I go, I am shielded by the presumption of innocence.

It is easy to consider the painful and embarrassing, even dangerous, experiences of others as "isolated incidents" or as things that happened to *them* because *they* did something wrong. It is convenient to think about what happened to the young Black man in the Eddie Bauer store as an isolated incident. This is possible because we hear about these experiences through the small windows in the back of the house. We look out and hear about what happened, but then we go back and survey our view through the much larger front windows of the house, and we reassure ourselves that this "larger view" must be the more common one.

While those operating in a "house of privilege" receive the presumption of innocence, those not privileged in the dominant culture are often seen as guilty until proven innocent and as suspicious or "difficult" if they complain or contest this treatment. In addition, they are often suspected of being guilty if another of their group has been found guilty of a similar transgression in the past. When I have the dominant culture presumption of innocence working for me, I am not likely to be held in suspicion, for instance, just because another white person has been guilty of a crime in the past. On the other hand, a Latino woman might be held under suspicion today if some other Latino woman or even another woman of color has been found to have committed some similar transgression yesterday.

This phenomenon of "guilt by association" is one of the reasons why people from dominant culture and people of color respond differently when a newspaper prints a picture of a student suspected of some crime and he or she happens to be a person of color. Students, faculty, and staff of color sometimes see the printing of the picture as a racist act, while counterparts of white dominant culture cannot fathom how merely printing the picture of a suspect could be construed as racist. When you are used to being given the presumption of innocence, the fact that others labor regularly under the assumption of guilt by association is hard for you to believe.

Consider the "guilt by association" that every Black man in the United States confronts on a daily basis. Movies, television, and other media have impressed upon the consciousness of dominant culture that all Black men are dangerous until proven otherwise -- this despite the fact that the statistics do not at all match the myth. In his book *The Rage of the Privileged Class*, Close points to the absurdity of linking all Black men with crime and violence:

FBI statistics show that blacks were arrested 245,437 times in 1991 for murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The country's total population then was just under 249 million, including nearly 31 million blacks and roughly 15 million black males. If we assume that each arrest represents the apprehension of a separate individual, blacks arrested for violent crimes make up less than 1 percent of the black population in 1991 -- and just under 1.7 percent of the

black male population (less, in fact, since the aggregate figure of 245,437 includes crimes committed by females). (1993, p. 94)

Imagine that your family members and friends as well as you all have had experiences where "guilt by association" meant that you were pulled over without provocation by the police, or stopped on the street to be questioned because you looked to be of the same race or ethnicity as some criminal suspect, or followed around by a store detective when you were browsing. At the risk of resurrecting many strong feelings, I ask you to consider what you would do if these were the experiences of you, your family, and friends, and you found yourself on a jury where a black man was being accused of murder by the same police department that regularly acted with racist intent and could not be trusted according to these experiences. When I put myself in this position and ask myself, "Could I find the defendant guilty, honestly, *beyond a reasonable doubt?*," I find it impossible to answer in the affirmative.

The Second Presumption: Worthiness

A second presumption often enjoyed by those who are members of the privileged in the dominant culture is that of worthiness. By the "presumption of worthiness," I mean the presumption that I am worthy, deserving and good enough to receive attention, services, respect, and the benefit of the doubt. This presumption can operate in many different contexts. As a white, upper middle class, heterosexual who does not have a visible disability, I will be taken at face value as a good candidate for a bank loan, a desired applicant for a job, a sought-after buyer of a house, and a customer who should be served as soon as possible. This presumption is strengthened if I am with my partner, who is a similarly privileged white man.

We do not have to look far for clear evidence that this presumption is not regularly applied to most people of color in the United States, even if they are members of the upper middle class. Study after study where applicants matched by everything except race have applied for jobs or bank loans, or have sought to be considered as a serious buyer for a house, have shown that the white applicant is treated with the presumption of worthiness -- in other words, that he or she is treated with serious consideration -- while the person of color is not. The presumption of worthiness even extends to getting appropriate medical care. A study at Harvard Medical School demonstrated that white people were much more likely to be offered advanced medical treatment, particularly heart transplants, than were nonwhites, and the results of this study have been duplicated at other medical facilities.

Again, we have a tendency to view these as "isolated incidents." This may have happened in some other town, or in that bank down the street, or at the hospital in the city, but still it is hard for persons who regularly get the dominant culture presumption of worthiness to believe that "it can happen here."

Taken to its extreme, the opposite of the presumption of worthiness is the assumption that others are bad, immoral, barbaric, not saved, savage, inhuman, non-human, or evil. These are the kinds of assumptions in our past history that have often led us to justify such practices as giving

blankets infused with small pox to Indians; selling people of color as slaves; or seizing possessions, land, or resources from members of non-dominant groups, such as Japanese Americans during World War II. If you have had these things happen to your ancestors, then you also know that given the right conditions these things can be repeated. The problem with the proposition that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" is that those with the power to decide whether or not we will do these things again are not usually interested in learning the details of this history. We do not want to dwell on the uncomfortable or the embarrassing, particularly when those who looked like us have been the perpetrators of the crimes, and so we sometimes want to ignore what is so dangerous for us to forget.

Consider the following quote, taken from a speech by a famous historical figure of the 20th century:

Take, for example, India: England did not acquire India in a lawful and legitimate manner, but rather without regard to the natives' wishes, views, or declarations of rights . . . Just as Cortes or Pizarro demanded for themselves Central America and the northern states of South America not on the basis of any legal claim, but from the absolute, inborn feelings of superiority of the white race. The settlement of the North American continent was similarly a consequence not of any higher claim in a democratic or international sense, but rather of a consciousness of what is right which had its sole roots in the conviction of the superiority and thus the right of the white race. (Mills, 1997, p. 106)

Can you identify the speaker?

This is but one of many instances when Adolph Hitler looked to past history to justify his particular brand of white supremacy. It was easy for Hitler to use history to show that governments have consistently acted as if the presumption of worthiness belonged only to the "master race."

Once again, I think it is important to remember that the view looks different when you are up above the fray, looking down over the valley. "Why," we ask ourselves, "do *they* keep bringing up things that happened (fill in the blank) ago." The blank may be filled with "more than a hundred years ago," as in the case of legally recognized slavery in the United States, or "fifty years ago," as in the case of the Jewish holocaust, or "a couple of years ago," as in the case of the murder of two lesbian partners in Southern Oregon. Why do not "they" just get over it? I believe that they just don't get over it because they know these events are the tips of large, dangerous, and present icebergs. Whenever we doubt the worthiness of another human being, with no concrete reasons to do so, we have not very far to go before we can justify treating that person as less than a fully-deserving human.

I think another reason why "they" should not just get over it is because remembering these painful, frightening, and enraging incidents is also to remember a proud history of courage under fire, of strength of character and of deep and abiding faith. Many of the greatest men and women in the history of this country, whether we know about them or not, are those who have faced discrimination and oppression. And the stories of these people help teach us all to stand up for

what is right. To dismiss this past as if it is no longer relevant is also to dismiss the lessons we need to survive.

The Third Presumption: Competence

The last presumption given to members of the dominant culture is the presumption of competence. In all of the jobs I have ever had, I was always treated as if I was competent, and then given the autonomy, encouragement and feedback to prove it. In nearly all of the experiences I ever had or continue to have as a student, I walk in and I am given the presumption of competence.

For many other women this has definitely not been the case, particularly if they sought to study or work in what was or is considered a "male" job or course of study. For many people of color, due in part to massive misunderstanding of how affirmative action works in hiring and education, their experience has been that they are presumed *incompetent* until they can prove otherwise. The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, in part, because the stereotypical connection between disabilities and incompetence was so pervasive and intransigent that even the Congress could not completely dismiss the evidence of the discrimination. As a people, however, we still seem to consider it okay to treat people as incompetent--or perhaps unworthy--to keep a job for which they are well qualified if they live with or wish to live with partners of the same gender. In the town where I work -- Eugene, Oregon -- we finally passed a law making it illegal to discriminate people in employment on the basis of the source of their income. Too many employers were found to be unwilling to hire a person if they were on welfare: if a person was poor, they were assumed to be both unworthy and incompetent.

To see how the confluence of these assumptions of guilt, unworthiness, incompetence affects learning, we can listen to the many educators who have tried to describe the experience of members of non-dominant culture groups.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks relates how being in a classroom changed for her when she went from a segregated to an integrated classroom. For the moment, put away any automatic assumption you have that integration is always more beneficial than segregation, and see this scene through her eyes:

Almost all our teachers...were Black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers - black folks who used our "minds."... Within these segregated schools, black children who were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission....Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was a place of ecstasy - pleasure and danger.

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and being that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was expected of us. Too much eagerness

to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority. When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment.... Realizing this, I lost my love of school. The classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy. (hooks, 1994, pp. 2-4)

The black children in hooks' class found themselves removed from an environment where they were enriched and encouraged by the presumptions of innocence and worthiness and competence. Instead they were delivered into classrooms where they were viewed guilty, unworthy and incompetent until proven otherwise. I find it difficult to listen to this passage without protesting segregation and promoting integration. I see this only by looking out of my large windows of privilege, because my learning was always nurtured in an environment and among teachers who believed that I was a competent, intelligent candidate for success. I always received the presumptions of worthiness and competence.

Here, for me, is where we get to what the real problem is with the concept of *tolerance*. When we are merely tolerating another person, we are wary. We are watching to see how they will act. We are not giving them the benefit of the doubt - the presumption of innocence, of worthiness, and of competence. We are, in fact, putting up with them because we know or think we should. If we are merely tolerating people, we do not provide critical feedback when it is needed. We do not expect them to behave appropriately to begin with, and we often write off bad behavior with the attitude of "what can you expect."

I believe that many of the teachers in these newly integrated schools were doing their best to tolerate the presence of Black children in their classrooms. But the teachers were wary, wondering what these strange children would do, and the children were the first to know that they were merely being tolerated, not really accepted, and certainly not appreciated.

Cumulative Effects and the Limits of Tolerance

Faculty and staff of non-privileged groups--people of color, gay or lesbian, people with disabilities--understand that many students of these groups are often denied the presumptions of innocence, worthiness and competence, and experience the campus as a place where they are merely tolerated. These faculty and staff know first-hand the pain, anger and isolation this treatment can cause. Thus these staff often do a double- and triple- duty, acting as mentors, guides and confidants for these students, whether or not this has any connection to their jobs on campus.

It is common for those of us who operate inside the house of privilege to be unaware of the extra obligations carried by these colleagues, or to treat these obligations as if they are just extracurricular activities as opposed to responses to the deep pain. At a recent faculty orientation I attended, new tenure-track faculty of color were specifically told that they should concentrate on their teaching and research almost exclusively and leave community service for later in their careers. One colleague later told me that she felt this clearly illustrated how the university did not understand her responsibilities to the students of color on campus.

This "view" should also make it clear to us why students from non-dominant groups often seek to spend at least some time everyday with others like themselves. They are just trying to breathe for a while in a place where they are appreciated and not merely tolerated and where they are given the benefit of the doubt.

When I ask people around the country--in colleges and universities, as well as in companies and corporations--to think of times that they felt like they really mattered and to describe how people were treating them, which led them to feel that way, their replies are amazingly similar. People feel like they matter when:

- People seek their opinion
- People respond to and/or use their feedback
- People give them both positive and critical feedback
- People seek to include them in discussions and decisions
- People give them challenging things to do
- People thank them for their contributions

When I ask people to think of times that they felt marginalized - like they did not matter - and that the people's treatment led them to feel that way, the lists are again similar. People feel like they are marginalized when:

- People talk over or around them
- Others take credit for their ideas or contributions
- They receive no positive feedback
- They are excluded from discussions and decisions
- They are set up to fail by being given no help with challenging assignments
- They are never challenged to do more than they have done before.

The problem is not, as I see it, that persons experiencing certain kinds of dominant culture privilege are given the presumptions of innocence, of worthiness and of competence. The problem is that it is transparent to those from the house of privilege that others do not get these presumptions.

As long as some of us receive automatic presumptions of innocence, worthiness and competence and yet refuse to hear and understand that others do not share these benefits, we can do little to create a respectful and inclusive environment. This is not necessarily because we do not want to help create this kind of environment. I am sure that many of us have signed petitions, participated in demonstrations, and spoken up in the face of injustice. However, it is crucial that we understand that when we do these things and we are among the privileged we are always acting within the house of privilege, constructed around us by the society itself.

Hence, when my husband and I participated in Gay Pride marches in Oregon during the years that the Oregon Citizens Alliance was trying, through legislation, to take away constitutional civil

rights from Oregon's gay and lesbian citizens, we were on the front line for as long as we chose to be. We could literally be marching in the parade from 11:00 a.m. until noon on a given Saturday and turn around at noon to walk into any restaurant to enjoy a romantic lunch together.

I can attend an antiracism rally on campus, wearing the appropriate buttons and shouting the appropriate slogans, and then take off the buttons to go any place in town in reasonable safety.

I can fight for legislation to strike down laws or policies on behalf of the disadvantaged people of color, immigrants, or those on welfare; but whether the legislation passes or not, my own success and prosperity are not affected.

If you are a person from a non-dominant group, you cannot so easily walk off the front lines. It is where you live.

So, what do I recommend as we seek to be effective allies in the struggles to improve our country and the social contract under which we operate? Here are six of the rules I try to observe for myself.

1. **TOLERATE NO ONE.** By merely tolerating anyone, I am treating them as less than a human being, fully worthy of my attention and respect.
2. In the absence of **DIRECT** evidence to the contrary, give everyone the presumption of innocence, the presumption of worthiness and the presumption of competence. Challenge my own (or anyone else's) thinking if someone appears to be denied these things in the absence of direct evidence.
3. Keep my own humility alive. It is easy to forget that I do not live on the "front lines." I can choose when and for how long to go there. It is, therefore, unseemly for me to brag about my civil rights work, the demonstrations I have attended, the petitions I have signed, or the persons I have advocated for, to people who spend their lives having to do this kind of work all the time.
4. Refuse to characterize the lived experiences of others as "isolated incidents." Challenge this characterization when I hear it from others.
5. Listen especially hard when it is difficult to listen. When I notice myself getting defensive as hearing from people of non-dominant groups that what I, my office, department or university did was offensive, I try to remember to take a deep breath and listen carefully for the effects they describe instead of justifying our original intent.
6. Take the opportunity to use my position of privilege (having the presumptions of innocence, worthiness and competence) to make sure that others, who may not have privilege, have their voices heard.

In whatever ways I have learned to see the characteristics of the house of privilege in which I live, I owe this vision to friends, colleagues and strangers who have taken the time to explain to me how their life experiences differ from my own. Until the society changes to the extent that everyone receives the presumptions of innocence, worthiness and competence, I cannot escape this house that separates my experience from others; therefore, I need to do what I can to see it clearly. The real challenge for all of us is to provide this same "fair housing" for everyone.

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Example: Anita Green



- ☞ Read case example in groups
- ☞ How can we afford Anita Green:
 - ☞ Innocence
 - ☞ Worthiness
 - ☞ Competence

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Implications for...



- ☞ Practice
- ☞ Policies
- ☞ Procedures

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