race with other white people. Stop pretending that you are exempt from the day-to-day realities of race. Take some of the burden of racism off of people of color. Bring it into your life so that you can dismantle racism in the white spaces of your life that people of color can't even reach. People of color, talk to your people about race. Feel the therapeutic effects of honest and safe conversation about race. Examine and confront your internalized racism. Make space to heal and rejuvenate.

Take care in your conversations, remember that you are dealing with the real hurt of human beings. But be brave in that care, be honest in that care. These conversations will never become easy, but they will become easier. They will never be painless, but they can lessen future pain. They will never be risk-free, but they will always be worth it.

four

Why am I always being told to "check my privilege"?

FOR A VERY LONG TIME, SEATTLE WAS A VERY LONELY place for me. I'd spent my entire life here, but it wasn't until my early thirties that I had really found a community.

My entire childhood spent in the working-class suburbs of Seattle had been very isolating. Until high school, my brother and I were almost always the only black kids in class. We had both found small groups of kids who would allow us to hang out in the periphery, but we never really belonged. As we became adults and race shaped more and more of our daily lives and the lives of the white people around us, our racial identity took on "real world" meaning, and isolated us from many of the few friends we'd managed to obtain over the years.

That all changed for me when I was invited to join a Facebook community of people of color in the greater Seattle area.

I was suddenly immersed into a world of black and brown artists, professors, musicians, and tech leaders. We would have hangouts where we'd eat vegan soup and sip fancy cocktails and talk about bold art and systemic oppression and political theory. We put together art showings and community conversations. We had amazing New Year's Eve parties where hundreds of elaborately dressed people of color danced the night away, afros and locs swaying to the beat. It was a dream come true. Suddenly, Seattle didn't seem like the gray city of repressed white comfort that it had previously been. I had found another Seattle—hip, smart, diverse Seattle.

I'd found a home.

We gathered one sunny afternoon for a picnic in the park. Sunny days in Seattle are almost as rare and unpredictable as outsiders think, but somehow, we'd managed to plan this afternoon and carry it off without a raindrop in sight. We met in Capitol Hill, a neighborhood I usually work very hard to avoid—as the overwhelmingly hip white pretentious vibe aggravates my anxiety. This is one of those neighborhoods where upper-middle-class white kids dress up in the same thrifted clothes that branded me a poverty-stricken outcast in school, but become cool when you are thin, white, and financially comfortable. But here we were, more people of color in one tiny park than the entire neighborhood had probably seen in the decades since people of color had been priced out of the neighborhood.

My younger son played with a little girl his age who had bouncy brown curls and a vocabulary far exceeding her six years while I talked with her father, a photographer, about his work. I talked with people on various arts commissions about

what shows they were looking forward to seeing this year and the funding they were hoping to provide to community projects. I talked with tech workers about what they were doing to diversify both their staff and the reach of their products. And we chatted about our children, our neighborhoods, our homes. We ate a variety of fancy hummus and salad and drank a fair amount of wine. It was, by any measure, turning into a lovely afternoon.

A few hours into the shindig, a group of black men walked over hesitantly from the basketball courts. They had a look of curiosity on their faces—likely wondering by what magic this large island of picnicking black people had suddenly appeared in the middle of this ocean of whiteness.

"Hey, what are y'all—some kind of group? What are you doing out here?" one of the men asked.

"We're a community of people of color in Seattle and we're having a picnic."

The man scanned the spread of people, appetizers, and wine and nodded, "Can we join you?"

Almost all conversation in the group came to a stop and an uncomfortable silence took its place.

At first I didn't know why. But then I knew. These were black people, but they were definitely not *with us.* They had a different style, a different swagger than ours. They were close-cropped fades and basketball shorts, we were long locs and hipster jeans. These were people who came to this white-dominated part of town simply for the well-maintained basketball court. We came for the gastro-pubs and art walks and a lot of us lived here. These were people that would have been called "real black" by people I grew up with who often

used such terms to point out how "not black" my education, speech, and fashion sense obviously made me.

"Sure," the organizer said, and handed up a bottle of wine. The awkwardness was eased and the men sat down and joined us. Conversation resumed as it had before, and after an hour or so, I gathered my kid and my picnic blanket and went home.

In the following days I couldn't stop thinking about those men who had approached us at the picnic. I couldn't stop thinking about the silence of our group as they walked up. Why had it been so awkward? Why would our own people, fellow people of color, make us so uncomfortable?

And then I realized why with a sinking feeling to my stomach. When we were building our community, those men weren't who we had in mind as members. When we talked about expanding art opportunities for people of color in Seattle, they weren't who we had in mind. When we talked about diversity in tech, they weren't who we had in mind. When we talked about getting a hip group of black and brown people together for a picnic on a sunny day, they weren't who we had in mind. When we talked about community, they weren't who we had in mind.

And this wasn't because we felt any animosity towards these men, it was because when we talked about people of color, we talked about *people like us*. We were talking about people of color with college degrees, and "high-fashion" clothes and eclectic tastes in music. We talked about people in our social groups with our interests and our opportunities and struggles. We talked about yes, people of color all facing oppression due to the color of our skin, and many due to our genders and

sexuality—but we were also talking about people with our specific sets of privilege.

And we hadn't examined that.

And it smacked us right in the face when a group of fellow people of color walked up to us and we immediately knew that they weren't invited. And what sucks is that they could have been all of these things—they could have been tech engineers or artists or lovers of eclectic music and this entire awkwardness could have been built off of nothing more than assumption and stereotype, or they could have had completely opposite interests and circumstances, but no matter what, they still would have been our people. But we didn't see them, because they simply hadn't occurred to *us*.

I then realized that there was a distinct set of my black friends who I had never seen at any of this group's events, even though just about every person of color in town was aware that the group existed. I began to ask some of them why they hadn't been around.

"Too pretentious," some said.

"I just don't really feel like I belong," said others.

"Nah, those are some bougie black folk," said a black woman I had dated.

I began to see how unaware of our privilege our group had been. We had been patting ourselves on the back for creating this great community, for creating a home for people of color in a hostile city—and our unexamined privilege had kept out those most negatively impacted by overwhelmingly white, wealthy Seattle—those who, unlike us, could not cushion some of the blows of racism with at least some of the indicators of success that white Seattle valued. Yes, we had worked

very hard for what we had been able to accomplish, but we'd also been very lucky. But we forgot the luck and wore our status as a symbol of pride—creating a hierarchy in a group in desperate need of solidarity. And no, I'm not saying that those men who approached us at the park needed us to save them or embrace them, but if we weren't going to be there for and with *all* people of color, we should probably at least stop pretending to be creating a radical space of acceptance and just admit that we were simply a social club for comfortable people of color.

That group has grown and changed over the years, and I don't really know if it's still as privileged or ignorant of its privilege as it once was. I'm not nearly as involved with it as I used to be. It is not what I'm seeking anymore. I wouldn't call it disillusionment—at least not with the group. It's an amazing and much-needed space for many who are often made to feel alone. But that one afternoon in the sun definitely brought about a disillusionment with myself and what type of black woman I thought I was, and caused me to question my individual work and change my focus to ensure that when I talk about black people, I'm talking, as best as I can while acknowledging the limitations of my own life experience, about *all* black people—of all classes, all education levels, all genders, all sexualities, and all abilities. And once I shifted that focus, my community opened up to me in ways that I never thought possible.

I DON'T KNOW IF THERE'S ONE PHRASE MORE MALIGNED in social justice language than "check your privilege." It is a

phrase most likely to be met with dismissal and derision. It's a phrase viewed as an ineffective weapon hurled at someone with no other purpose than to win an argument or at least silence opposition. Often people will preempt requests to check said privilege in heated social justice conversations by saying, "I bet this is where you tell me to check my privilege" with the eye-roll–filled sarcasm seeping through. But as disliked as the phrase "check your privilege" is, I've found from my conversations and from witnessing the conversations of others that very few people actually know what privilege is, let alone how they would go about checking it.

It is a shame that so much derision has been heaped upon a concept that so few people understand—especially one as important as privilege. Not only is the concept of privilege integral to our real understanding of issues of race in the West, it is crucial to the success of any efforts towards social justice that we make.

So what is privilege? Is it, as many fear, "good shit you should feel bad about having so that other people can feel better about not having it?" No, it's not. But that isn't to say that understanding privilege won't make you feel bad. It might make you feel very bad, and I'm convinced that is why so many of us are quick to dismiss discussions on privilege before they even get started. We may not fully "get" privilege, but we have a feeling that understanding our privilege will change what we feel about ourselves and our world, and not in a good way.

The definition of privilege is in reality much simpler than a lot of social justice discussions would have you believe. Privilege, in the social justice context, is an advantage or a set of advantages that you have that others do not.

These privileges are not due 100 percent to your efforts (although your hard work may indeed have helped), and the benefits of these privileges are disproportionately large or at least partially undeserved when compared to what the privilege is for. These advantages can often be ascribed to certain social groups: privilege based on race, physical ability, gender, class, etc. But these privileges can also lie in areas that you may have not considered, like sexuality, body type, and neurological differences. It is in these advantages and their coupled disadvantages that the health and well-being of large amounts of people are often determined. If we are truly dedicated to addressing systemic oppression and inequality, we must understand the full impact of these advantages and disadvantages in order to move toward real change in our society and ourselves.

Let's use a bit of my privilege as an example: I have a college degree in political science. I worked very hard for my degree, studying at all hours of the night while also taking care of a small child. I probably worked harder than many of the other students in my class, being the only black female single parent there. I also worked hard to get into college in the first place, maintaining my grades while working every evening to help my single mom make ends meet. I'm proud of my degree and the effort that I put into it. While I do have a right to be proud of my degree, it would be dishonest of me to pretend that this degree is 100 percent owed to my efforts. I was raised by a college-educated mother who taught me that a degree was important. I grew up as a neuro-typical, nondisabled child whom school was designed to serve and for whom teachers were willing and trained to dedicate their time and efforts. My grade school education was free and

open to people of all genders and economic classes. I had enough security in my home and nutrition as a child to be able to concentrate on my studies. I live in a country that provides at least some college grants and loans. I grew up in an area that allows and supports the advanced education of women. I did not have to drop out of school to help support my family. I am a documented citizen and therefore eligible for financial aid. These are just some of the many ways in which privilege helped me get my college degree. To look at this list and say, "anybody could do this if they just work hard enough" would be a lie.

Some of the benefits that I've received from my degree are also not what the degree, in itself, has earned. Benefits that should go with my degree are things like being more qualified for a job in politics, government, or social services. Also the ability to yell, "I HAVE A DEGREE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE!" during arguments about politics. I get a well-earned warm feeling when I stare at my diploma. I get to talk about my degree in political science in this book. That's about $30k in benefits, right? Right? If you can think of any more, please email me because it would make me feel a lot better about these student loans I'm still paying. But there are some benefits to my degree that are, well, let's say they're "problematic." Yes, my degree makes me more qualified for jobs that utilize my political science knowledge, but that degree—any degree—made me eligible for management positions in the marketing and tech fields I've worked in, while more talented coworkers without a degree were automatically disqualified. Yes, I do deserve to feel proud of my degree, but it isn't deserving of the general reputation that

I, as a college graduate, am a smarter, more responsible, and more valuable citizen than those without a degree (especially when you consider all the advantages listed above that helped make my degree accessible to me). My degree has also gotten me higher pay than other people of color that I worked with in just about every job I've held in my adult life, and I've never worked in a field (until perhaps now, as a writer) that has even mildly utilized my political science skills. All of these advantages, for a status that I didn't fully earn, set me higher up in a socioeconomic hierarchy than others, and place other people below.

If I were to go along thinking that my degree was 100 percent due to my efforts and all the benefits that I received were 100 percent deserved, it would then require that I think that those who did not benefit deserved to not benefit—say, an otherwise qualified coworker of mine who was exempt from the promotion I received because he did not have a degree. Because my advantage over that coworker helped me and hurt him, I would have to buy into the entire system in order to believe that it was 100 percent deserved. I would accept my promotion thinking that it was rightfully mine, and then I would promote other people, using their degree as one of the deciding factors, thinking that it rightfully indicated that they deserved the promotion—even if that degree had nothing to do with the position I was hiring for. I would then be perpetuating the same advantages and disadvantages—or system of privilege—on other people. I would be part of the reason why the deck was stacked against those who were unable, for so many reasons, to get a college degree. In a fair competition truly based on skill and experience, I may have still gotten that

promotion. I may well have been the most qualified person for the job. But it wasn't a fair competition, and in acting like it was fair, and accepting my prize without question, I helped ensure that it would stay unfair.

This right here, the realization that we may be a part of the reason why the deck is stacked against others, that we may have been contributing to it for years without our knowledge, is why the concept of privilege is so threatening to so many. We don't want to think that we are harming others, we do not want to believe that we do not deserve everything we have, and we do not want to think of ourselves as ignorant of how our world works. The concept of privilege violates everything we've been told about fairness and everything we've been told about the American Dream of hard work paying off and good things happening to good people. We want to know that if we do "a" we can expect "b," and that those who never get "b" have never done "a." The concept of privilege makes the world seem less safe. We want to protect our vision of a world that is fair and kind and predictable. That reaction is natural, but it doesn't make the harmful effects of unexamined privilege less real.

When somebody asks you to "check your privilege" they are asking you to pause and consider how the advantages you've had in life are contributing to your opinions and actions, and how the lack of disadvantages in certain areas is keeping you from fully understanding the struggles others are facing and may in fact be contributing to those struggles. It is a big ask, to check your privilege. It is hard and often painful, but it's not nearly as painful as living with the pain caused by the unexamined privilege of others.

You may right now be saying "but it's not my privilege that is hurting someone, it's their lack of privilege. Don't blame me, blame the people telling them that what they have isn't as good as what I have." And in a way, that is true, but know this, a privilege has to come with somebody else's disadvantage—otherwise, it's not a privilege. As a light-skinned black woman, I'm viewed by many in society as more intelligent and less threatening than darker-skinned black people. This is a privilege, because in order to be viewed as "more intelligent" others have to be viewed as "less intelligent." If black people of all shade ranges were viewed as equally intelligent until proven otherwise by their actions, then that privilege would cease to exist. But when somebody treats me as "more intelligent" and treats a darker-skinned black person as "less intelligent," if I don't challenge that, if I just accept the unearned compliment (and the better grade, the job offer, the access to more financially successful areas of society) with a smile and don't ask why it was given to me or why it's not also given to my darker-skinned counterparts—I'm benefitting from unfair privilege and helping perpetuate it further. The darker-skinned person does not really have much power to challenge that privilege—who would listen to her when they already consider her less intelligent? If I want to live in a world where shadeism (a byproduct of racism creating a hierarchy within minority races based on skin tone) doesn't exist, I have to do my part by confronting it whenever I encounter it—even if it means less benefits for me and some uncomfortable conversations.

When we are willing to check our privilege, we are not only identifying areas where we are perpetuating oppression

in order to stop personally perpetuating that oppression, but we are also identifying areas where we have the power and access to change the system as a whole. Where I benefit most from being able-bodied is where I have the most power and access to change a system that disadvantages disabled people. Where I benefit most from being cisgender is where I have the most power and access to change a system that disadvantages transgender people. When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find our opportunities to make real change.

So yes, we all need to be checking our privilege. And not just when we are told to in the middle of an argument. I recommend practicing looking for your privilege at first when you are in a neutral situation. Sit down and think about the advantages you've had in life. Have you always had good mental health? Did you grow up middle class? Are you white? Are you male? Are you nondisabled? Are you neuro-typical? Are you a documented citizen of the country you live in? Did you grow up in a stable home environment? Do you have stable housing? Do you have reliable transportation? Are you cisgender? Are you straight? Are you thin, tall, or conventionally attractive? Take some time to really dig deep through all of the advantages that you have that others may not. Write them down.

You may well want to list your disadvantages as well. This is not the time for that, so please resist the urge. It is natural to feel like focusing on your advantages invalidates your disadvantages and your struggles in life, but that is not what will happen. You can be both privileged in some areas of life, and underprivileged in others. Both can be true at once and

can impact your life at the same time. This is an exercise you should do even if you feel extremely underprivileged in life. I feel very underprivileged as a black, queer woman, and it would be easy to dismiss calls to check my own privilege under the argument that it's really those with a lot of privilege who should be doing the work and I'm too busy fighting racism and sexism to fight the few advantages I do have. But failing to check my own privilege means that my efforts to fight racism and sexism would leave out many of the women and people of color I claim to be fighting for. I march for black people, but am I marching for black trans women, disabled black people, incarcerated black people as well? The number of people I'd be leaving behind and continuing to oppress by refusing to check my privilege would make my efforts ineffective at best and harmful at worst. If thinking about your privilege without addressing your oppression is hard for you, and you need to write down your lack of privilege later, that is fine. But please, dedicate this time to seeing how you can make your understanding of justice and equality more inclusive.

Once you've written down a nice long list of privilege, start thinking about how this privilege might have influenced not only your status in society, but your experience with and understanding of the world at large. How might your privilege have impacted your ideas on racism, on education, on the environment? Then start seeking out work on these subjects by people who don't have your same privilege, and listen when those people are speaking. Being privileged doesn't mean that you are always wrong and people without privilege are always right—it means that there is a good chance you are missing a few very important pieces of the puzzle.

Practice this often, especially when thinking about social or political issues. After having practiced looking at my privilege more formally, I casually revisit this exercise whenever I'm confronted with a new privilege that I was previously unaware of, and again at the start of every year, as a way to refocus on my social justice goals. Get used to that uncomfortable feeling that arises when you discover that perhaps your privilege is hindering your ability to truly understand or address an issue. Get used to that pang of guilt that comes with realizing yet another area of life where you've benefited at the expense of others. It will not kill you. You can withstand it. You want to be more comfortable with this, so that when you are confronted with your privilege in a stressful situation (like a Facebook argument that suddenly takes a turn for the worse) you will be able to limit your defensiveness enough to listen and learn.

This will also help you better empathize with the feelings of anger, fear, and shame that people feel when confronted with their privilege and may help you approach someone about their privilege with more generosity. It is also easier to explain privilege to someone else, if you should choose to do so, if you are familiar with explaining it to yourself. When you first became aware of an area of your privilege, it did not appear to you as "privilege." You had to be able to see what your advantage was, that others did not have that advantage, and that it was influencing your words and decisions in a way that could be harming others. Remembering this might allow you to put more detail into your entreaties for people to check their privilege and may increase the chances they will actually try. No, you do not owe someone who is oppressing you with their unexamined privilege any particular kindness

or education, but know that you have unexamined privilege too, no matter how woke you think you are—and someone will be telling you to check your privilege while you try to battle your own defensiveness as you figure out what the hell they are talking about.

If someone confronts you with your privilege from a place of anger or even hatred, if someone does not want to take the time or does not have the emotional energy to further explain to you where your privilege lies, know that it is still a kindness. Try to remember that the alternative to not being made aware of your privilege (no matter how it may sting) is your continued participation in the oppression of others. Someone is giving you an opportunity to do better, no matter how unpleasant the delivery. Thank them.

Once you are aware of your privilege, you can get to work on dismantling it. This is where checking your privilege really pays off. Here are some examples of where you can find both privilege and opportunities to help create change in your day-to-day life:

- Does your privilege mean that you are more likely to sit in a manager's meeting while others are not? Ask why there are no disabled people in the room.
- Does your privilege mean that politicians are begging for your political support? Ask what they are going to do for people of color next time they knock on your door to hand you a flier.
- Were you able to get a fancy private education as a child? Use your resulting financial security to support levies to improve public schools.

- Don't have to juggle work and children? Use the promotion that added flexibility helped you get to support employer-funded childcare and family leave programs.
- Have the schedule flexibility to attend a PTA meeting? At your next meeting, ask them to move future meeting times to hours that more working parents can attend and give parents other ways to contribute if they can't be there.

The possibilities of where you can leverage your privilege to make real, measurable change toward a better world are endless. Every day you are given opportunities to make the world better, by making yourself a little uncomfortable and asking, "who doesn't have this same freedom or opportunity that I'm enjoying now?" These daily interactions are how systems of oppression are maintained, but with awareness, they can be how we tear those systems down.

So please, check your privilege. Check it often.