
CROSS PRIVILEGE DIALOGUES: AVOIDING THE TRAP OF CENTERING YOURSELF WHEN YOU HAVE MORE PRIVILEGE

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I have a dear friend who has become a treasured empathy buddy. Once a week, we call each other and share what's going in our world. Many times, I explore big challenges with her – my ongoing difficulty in finding meaning since my son's death; the at times crippling self-doubt that is my legacy of internalized racism. Other times, we focus on smaller celebrations and worries – the success of my first garden, my teen's amazing foray into baking that was accompanied by a completely cleaned kitchen (not sure which was the greater miracle!). Usually these conversations flow with an ease created through numerous encounters that have established mutual affection, shared values and a commitment to our practice of nonviolent communication. This week, we had an interaction that halted that sweet flow, re-enacting a pattern I've seen in many cross-privilege dialogues.

As we checked in before diving into deeper empathy, I noted my son was on a plane heading to college 2700 miles away. I offered my celebration that his small liberal arts college was isolating and testing every student before they got on campus, providing weekly tests for some students and pool testing for everyone. I was so relieved that the kind of test and trace that helps to control COVID-19 was available to his small campus which had a lab affiliation. I also shared a mourning. The previous day, my son had expressed a sentiment I've heard from so many Black people in my life. As he described an incident in which he was criticized for filling out part of a form incorrectly, despite accidentally not being included in the email asking students to complete it and still being the first to do so, he concluded, "No worries. I know I need to show up and do better than everyone else in order for people to think I'm the same as everyone else." While I felt sad that he, too, had not escaped this legacy of repeated experiences that told him he was not good enough, it was a weary, mild sadness. As I recounted his words, I was connected to my son's deep need, shared by so many who came before him, to be seen for his effort, to trust in his resiliency in the face of inequitable treatment, to affirm his agency to shape his destiny.

But honestly, in the midst of all the things that Black sons face, that Black mothers worry about when their children leave home and travel across the country, this was a minor thing. I shared it with my friend to give a picture of my inner world that day – of the things I was holding that early morning – not because I needed any support about it. I fully expected I'd mention it, and that we'd move on to the bigger challenges we were both dealing with.

That didn't happen. My friend felt outrage. Instead of getting the “ugh” that I might have gotten from a Black friend, she expressed her upset that this was my son's experience. And in that moment, I had that internal split that many of you would recognize. What do I do with this moment? Her reaction stimulated a familiar dilemma. This wasn't a big deal for me at this moment. Do I intellectually understand how my son's experience is toxic? Do I get how it wears the soul down to always have to strive to prove your worth? Do I know the subtle background hopelessness that comes when you see yet another person wield the filter of white supremacy that catches and retains the times when you meet their negative expectations and sifts through and discards all the times when you exceed it? Of course. It's not just my son's experience. It's mine, and my siblings, and my parents. It's my 85-year-old friend who cried one day about the burden of always being “on” so that white people don't judge our whole race by our behavior. I get it. But most days, that whole experience is in my background. The impact of white supremacy for me is like standing in the middle of a strong storm. I stand braced against it, leaning forward. It definitely impacts me, but I've learned to adjust to that punishing wind. I've unconsciously adapted to the energy I must use to lean forward and can do so with it rarely requiring my conscious attention. Moments like my son's will require a minor course correction, but not my full attention. My attention is focused on watching out for the other projectiles flung my way by that storm, the ones that would crush me. So, what do I do in this moment when her reaction treats the wind as if it's the missile heading my way?

Because I value the relationship with my friend deeply, I decided to muddle through explaining why her reaction was so disconnecting for me. This required me to refrain from my common response in those situations. Often, when a white person reacts much more strongly to some event in my life than I do, I slow down and give them space. I let them have their moment of coming face-to-face with the systemic inequities that I live with daily. I agree with them that it's completely unfair. I empathize with their desire for a world that is better. But as I do all that, there's a small part of me that is frustrated and rolling my eyes. That part is saying, *“Look, don't you see what's happening here? All of a sudden, my minor pain is about you. Instead of the simple nod to shared reality, to my experience being seen that I was hoping for when I shared, I'm now taking care of you.”*

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This has happened to me many times around topics related to my experience as a Black woman. It comes up whenever there is a difference in experience due to differences in

societal privilege. My pain gets decentered. My needs – for simple shared reality with choice about how much pain I stir up and dive into – gets subsumed into the other person’s needs for making sense of the world, for justice, support, and standing up for what’s right. In those moments, I experience an internal demand to show up for a white person in distress¹. You are my friend - I have genuine care for your well-being. I know how much anguish is stirred when we touch into these vast, systemic inequities. I want to care for my friend in pain. But there’s also a subtle message I infer in my white friend’s continued return to and elaboration of a topic I’m moving away from: *Don’t you get how big and important this topic is? Aren’t you outraged at how horrendous it is that we still have these experiences in our times?* If I insist on moving away from the topic, I worry that I’m seen as not affirming what’s true deep in my core – of course the impact of white supremacy is deep and wide and worth every resource we can throw at it.

What’s different in our reaction? For my friend hearing this story, it’s like she just stepped into the storm, with no muscles to brace against it. It’s huge and overwhelming and in that moment, taking all her attention. But there are no projectiles coming at her in that storm, and she will step out of it soon. For me – I’ve been standing in that storm and have learned how to keep moving in spite of it. I feel it - it ranges from distracting, to irritating to downright exhausting when the wind picks up. But it’s not where I’m choosing to put my focus. I don’t want to spend energy trying to get rid of only this specific storm that’s raging around me. Instead, I want to change the entire rotten system that produces damaging climate change by privileging wealthy countries’ use of our earth’s resources over care for our environment, thus leading to an increase in global warming that keeps birthing the storms. But all of a sudden, I’m being called to pay attention to this one storm and mourn its effects.

When you’ve been dealing with the relentless impact of white supremacy, sometimes you don’t want to keep talking about it, to unpack it, to rail against it. In that moment with my son, I wanted a brief acknowledgment of that impact, but I was really interested in a celebration of him! A senior in college. Dean’s list for two semesters. A genuinely sweet person who unfailingly encourages everyone to keep showing up and trying. I wanted the relief of a barrier from the wind, not to be called to focus on every gust. But in those

¹ As noted, these dynamics happen across all sorts of privilege divides (gender, ethnicity, body size, sexual identity, etc.). I’m using Black and white in this essay since these were the areas of difference that led to the experience I’m exploring.

moments, the white person I'm talking to often has lost track of why I brought up the topic in the first place. Usually, they don't see that by insisting on going into much more detail without checking with me, they're drawing my attention to something I might have been eager to set down for a moment. Often, they believe they are being supportive by focusing on something they are sure impacts me and that I must care about. They likely don't see how the shift in roles in that conversation - my moving from expressing my pain to providing support and education while they share their strong reaction and confusion - might result in us having very different levels of satisfaction with that conversation.

So, let me make that difference clearer and offer some tips for these moments.

- 1. The situation impacts us differently in fundamental ways.** There is a difference between living through an experience and hearing someone live through an experience, just like there's a difference between breaking one's leg in a car accident and watching your partner whose leg was broken in the accident. Both people are suffering. If I'm the watcher, I can feel deeply saddened by my partner's experience, longing for their relief of pain and ease of movement and for more intention and focus when people drive. I can empathize with my partner with the broken leg. But ultimately, I will walk away, unbroken and with no physical discomfort, after I've empathized and mourned with them. The person with the broken leg will still be dealing with all of the myriad fears and discomforts and constraints that I will leave behind.
- 2. The conversation is rarely mutually beneficial.** I'm not getting support in those moments and I'm rarely experiencing shared reality. I'm working to support or educate you. I'm working to share with you just enough of my experience, sometimes stretching into deep vulnerability, without going into so much detail that I'm retraumatized by all the moments this one is connected to. Depending on your reaction I may even now be trying to educate you by proving I'm not misinterpreting someone's behavior or making too much of it.
- 3. My needs are generally dropped when we focus on your experience.** Take a moment before going into your reaction to my experience. Ask yourself, "why did this person tell me this?" "What might they be needing from me?" "Is what I'm about to say attending to their needs or to my own?" If you realize you need my support because you're so deeply impacted by something I said, realize what you're truly asking of me. When I respond to your reaction, it effectively pushes me to set aside my pain and my reasons for sharing my experience with you in the first place to

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turn the attention to you and attend to your feelings. Before you ask that of me, truly check. Is there no one else who can support you in this moment who won't have to risk their well-being to do so?

4. **Check with me before sharing your pain about my situation.** Don't jump into sharing your intense reaction and assume I'm ready to go there with you. Ask me if I'm open to hearing what's coming up for you and have the resources to hold your outrage.
5. **Trust that my no to a deeper conversation with you about this issue is truly a yes to many things that are important to me that have nothing to do with you.** There are many solid reasons why I might not want to go deeper into my experience or hear your pain. Before doing so, I might want trust that you can hold all of my pain if I bring it up. I might be choosing not to confront the impact of white supremacy because I need that distance to hold on to my equilibrium. I might want the ease of sharing myself with someone who gets me fully, where I have hope that a similar history predicts shared reality and a lack of defensiveness.

I shared all this with my friend, struggling to articulate why I felt both a pull and resistance to going further into my son's experience. She appeared to understand and I was curious when she asked to share an example of her own that was similar to what I was describing. She noted that as a white woman, if she wanted to go for a walk at dusk, she might say something about hesitating to go since women have to think twice about whether a walk in the dark is safe. If a man in her life heard her and began talking of the outrage he felt that she even needed to consider safety, even in the most caring way that made it clear he got that gender violence was systemic and not about her, there would still be a mismatch. She made a comment just to be seen for a common experience, not because she was significantly impacted in that moment or wanted companionship to dismantle patriarchy. A man who goes on about the outrage of the situation while she wants a walk is missing her completely. That happens all the time for Black people. Yes – we're impacted by and care deeply about how we fare in such an entrenched system of white supremacy, but we don't want to discuss that in every moment. I invite those members of our community who are white to honor our experience by working to attend to our needs, not yours, when the topic comes up.

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