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What Can We Do?

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The problem of privilege and oppression is deep and wide, and to work with it we have to be able to see it clearly so that we can talk about it in useful ways. To do that, we have to reclaim some difficult language that names what's going on, language that has been so misused and maligned that it generates more heat than light. We can't just stop using words like *racism*, *sexism*, *ableism*, and *privilege*, however, because these are tools that focus our awareness on the problem and all the forms it takes. Once we can see and talk about what's going on, we can analyze how it works as a system. We can identify points of leverage where change can begin.

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For several centuries, capitalism has provided the economic context for privilege and oppression. As such, it has been and continues to be a powerful force, especially in relation to class, gender, and race. Its effects are both direct and indirect. Historically, it was the engine that drove the development of modern racism. In a less direct way, it creates conditions of scarcity that set the stage for competition, fear, and antagonism directed across differences of race, ethnicity, and gender. Through the class differences that it creates, it also shapes people's experience of privilege and the lack of it. This is an example of the matrix of domination (or matrix of privilege) through which the various forms of difference and privilege interact and shape one another.

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Although disadvantaged groups take the brunt of the trouble, privileged groups are also affected by it, partly because misery visited on others comes back to haunt those who benefit from it, especially in the form of defensiveness and fear. But trouble also affects privileged groups directly by limiting and shaping the lives of people who have privilege. The trouble also affects entire social systems, from families to corporations and schools to communities, societies, and global political and economic systems.

The greatest barrier to change is that dominant groups . . . don't see the trouble as *their* trouble, which means they don't feel obliged to do something about it. This happens for a variety of reasons—because they don't know the trouble exists in the first place, because they don't *have* to see it as their trouble, because they see it as a personal rather than a systemic problem, because they're reluctant to give up privilege, because they feel angry and deprived and closed to the idea that they have privilege, because they're blinded by prejudice, because they're afraid of what will happen if they acknowledge the reality of privilege and oppression.

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[To] think about the trouble as everyone's responsibility—everybody's "hook"—and nobody's fault . . . is especially useful for members of privileged groups who have a hard time seeing themselves in relation to privilege without feeling guilty. It's easy to fall into this trap because people tend to use an individualistic model of the world that reduces everything to individual intentions and goodness or badness. A powerful and liberating alternative comes from the fact that we're always participating in something larger than ourselves, social systems. To understand privilege and oppression, we have to look at what we're participating in *and* how we participate. . . . This means we can be involved in a society's or organization's troubles without doing anything wrong and without being bad people.

Privilege is created and maintained through social systems that are dominated by, centered on, and identified with privileged groups. A racist society, for example, is white-dominated, white-centered, and white-identified. Since privilege is rooted primarily in systems—such as families, schools, and workplaces—change isn’t simply a matter of changing people. The solution also has to include entire systems [that] . . . shape how people feel, think, and behave as individuals, how they see themselves and one another.

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With this approach, we can begin to think about how to make ourselves part of the solution to the problem of privilege and oppression. . . .

It is in small and humble choices that privilege, oppression, and the movement toward something better actually happen.

... WHAT CAN WE DO?

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ACKNOWLEDGE THAT PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION EXISTS

A key to the continued existence of every system of privilege is unawareness, because privilege contradicts so many basic human values that it invariably arouses opposition when people know about it. . . .

This is why most cultures of privilege mask the reality of oppression by denying its existence, trivializing it, calling it something else, blaming it on those most victimized by it, or diverting attention from it. Instead of treating oppression as a serious problem, we go to war or get embroiled in controversial “issues” such as capital gains tax cuts or “family values” or immigrant workers. There would be far more active opposition to white privilege, for example, if white people lived with an ongoing awareness of how it actually affects the everyday lives of those it oppresses as “not white.” . . .

It’s one thing to become aware and quite another to stay that way. The greatest challenge when we first become aware of a critical perspective on the world is simply to hang on to it. . . . In some ways, it’s harder and more important to pay attention to systems of privilege than it is to people’s behavior. . . . [F]or example, the structure of capitalism creates large social patterns of inequality, scarcity, and exploitation that have played and continue to play a major role in the perpetuation of various forms of privilege and oppression. It is probably wishful thinking to suppose we can end privilege without also changing a capitalist system of political economy that allows an elite to control the vast majority of wealth and income and leaves the rest of the population to fight over what’s left. But such wishful thinking is, in fact, what we’re encouraged to engage in most of the time—to cling to the idea that racism, for example, is just a problem with a few bad whites, rather than seeing how it is connected to a much larger matrix of privilege and oppression.

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By itself, however, changing how we think won’t be enough to solve the problem. Privilege will not simply go away as the result of a change in individual consciousness. Ultimately, we’ll have to apply our understanding of how systems work to the job of changing systems themselves—economic, political, religious, educational, and familial. . . .

Maintaining a critical consciousness takes commitment and work. Awareness is something that either we maintain in the moment or we don’t. And the only way to hang on to an awareness of privilege is to make that awareness an ongoing part of our lives.

PAY ATTENTION

Understanding how privilege and oppression operate and how you participate is where working for change begins. It's easy to have opinions, but it takes work to know what you're talking about. The simplest way to begin is to make reading about privilege part of your life. Unless you have the luxury of a personal teacher, you can't understand this issue without reading. Many people assume they already know what they need to know because it's part of everyday life. But they're usually wrong, because just as the last thing a fish would discover is water, the last thing people discover is society itself and something as pervasive as privilege.

We also have to be open to the idea that what we think we know is, if not wrong, so deeply shaped by systems of privilege that it misses most of the truth. This is why activists talk with one another and spend time reading one another's writing, because seeing things clearly is tricky. This is also why people who are critical of the status quo are so often self-critical as well—they know how complex and elusive the truth really is and what a challenge it is to work toward it. . . .

As you educate yourself, avoid reinventing the wheel. Many people have already done a lot of work that you can learn from. There's no way to get through it all, but you don't have to in order to develop a clear enough sense of how to act in meaningful and informed ways. . . . Men who feel there is no place for them in women's studies might start with books about patriarchy and gender inequality that are written by men. In the same way, whites can begin with writings on race privilege written by other whites. Sooner or later, however, dominant groups will need to turn to what people in subordinate groups have written, because they are the ones who have done most of the work of figuring out how privilege and oppression operate.

Reading is only the beginning. At some point you have to look at yourself and the world to see if you can identify what you're reading about. . . .

[T]aking responsibility means not waiting for others to tell you what to do, to point out what's going on, or to identify alternatives. If dominant groups are going to take their share of responsibility, it's up to them to listen, watch, ask, and listen again, to make it their business to find out for themselves. If they don't, they'll slide down the comfortable blindered path of privilege. And then they'll be *just* part of the problem and they *will* be blamed and they'll have it coming.

LEARN TO LISTEN

Attentive listening is especially difficult for members of dominant groups. If someone confronts you with your own behavior that supports privilege, . . . [d]on't tell them they're too sensitive or need a better sense of humor, and don't try to explain away what you did as something else than what they're telling you it was. Don't say you didn't mean it or that you were only kidding. Don't tell them what a champion of justice you are or how hurt you feel because of what they're telling you. Don't make jokes or try to be cute or charming, since only access to privilege can lead someone to believe these are acceptable responses to something as serious as privilege and oppression. Listen to what's being said. Take it seriously. Assume for the time being that it's true, because . . . it probably is. And then take responsibility to do something about it.

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LITTLE RISKS: DO SOMETHING

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When you *openly* change how you participate in a system, you do more than change your own behavior; you also change how the system happens. When you change how a

system happens, you change the social environment that shapes other people's behavior, which, in turn, further changes how the system happens. And when you do that, you also help to change the consequences that come out of the dynamic relationship between systems and individuals, including patterns of privilege and oppression.

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As you become more aware, questions will arise about what goes on at work, in the media, in families, in communities, in religious institutions, in government, on the street, and at school—in short, just about everywhere. The questions don't come all at once (for which we can be grateful), although they sometimes come in a rush that can feel overwhelming. If you remind yourself that it isn't up to you to do it all, however, you can see plenty of situations in which you can make a difference, sometimes in surprisingly simple ways. Consider the following possibilities.

Make noise, be seen. Stand up, volunteer, speak out, write letters, sign petitions, show up. Every oppressive system feeds on silence. Don't collude in it. Breaking the silence is especially important for dominant groups, because it undermines the assumption of solidarity that privilege depends on. If this feels too risky, practice being aware of how silence reflects your investment in solidarity with other dominant-group members. This can be a place to begin working on how you participate in making privilege and oppression happen: "Today I said nothing, colluded in silence, and this is how I benefited from it. Tomorrow I can try something different."

Find little ways to withdraw support from . . . [oppressive systems,] starting with yourself. It can be as simple as not laughing at a racist or heterosexist joke or saying you don't think it's funny, or writing a letter to your senator or representative or the editor of your newspaper, objecting to an instance of sexism in the media. When my local newspaper ran an article whose headline referred to sexual harassment as "earthy behavior," for example, I wrote a letter pointing out that harassment has nothing to do with being "earthy."

The key to withdrawing support is to interrupt the flow of business as usual. You can subvert the assumption that everyone's going along with the status quo by simply not going along. When you do this, you stop the flow, if only for a moment, but in that moment other people can notice and start to think and question. It's a perfect time to suggest the possibility of alternatives, such as humor that isn't at someone else's expense, or of ways to think about discrimination, harassment, and violence that do justice to the reality of what's going on and how it affects people.

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Dare to make people feel uncomfortable, beginning with yourself. At the next local school board meeting, for example, you can ask why principals and other administrators are almost always white and male (unless your system is an exception that proves the rule), while the teachers they supervise and the lower-paid support staff are mostly women and people of color. Or look at the names and mascots used by local sports teams and see if they exploit the heritage and identity of Native Americans. If that's the case, ask principals and coaches and owners about it. Consider asking similar kinds of questions about privilege and difference in your place of worship, workplace, and local government.

It may seem that such actions don't amount to much, until you stop for a moment and feel your resistance to doing them—worrying, for example, about how easily you could make people uncomfortable, including yourself. If you take that resistance to action as a measure of power, then your potential to make a difference is plain to see. The potential for people to feel uncomfortable is a measure of the power for change inherent in such simple acts of not going along with the status quo.

Some will say it isn't "nice" to make people uncomfortable, but systems of privilege do a lot more than make people feel uncomfortable, and there isn't anything "nice" about allowing that to continue. Besides, discomfort is an unavoidable part of any meaningful process of change. You can't grow without being willing to challenge your assumptions and

take yourself to the edge of your competencies, where you're bound to feel uncomfortable. If you can't tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and discomfort, then you'll never get beneath superficial appearances or learn or change anything of much value, including yourself.

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Openly choose and model alternative paths. [Identifying] . . . alternatives and [following] . . . them openly so that other people can see what we're doing . . . creates tension in a system, which moves toward resolution. . . . We don't have to convince anyone of anything. As Gandhi put it, the work begins with us trying to be the change we want to see happen in the world. If you think this has no effect, watch how people react to the slightest departures from established paths and how much effort they expend trying to ignore or explain away or challenge those who choose alternative paths.

Actively promote change in how systems are organized around privilege. The possibilities here are almost endless, because social life is complicated and privilege is everywhere. You can, for example,

Speak out for equality in the workplace.

Promote awareness and training around issues of privilege.

Support equal pay and promotion practices for everyone.

Oppose the devaluing of women, people of color, and people with disabilities, and the work they do, from dead-end jobs to glass ceilings.

Support the well-being of mothers, children, and people with disabilities, and defend their right to control their bodies and their lives.

Don't support businesses that are inaccessible to people with disabilities, and tell them why you don't.

Don't support businesses that engage in unfair labor practices, including union-busting. Support the formation of unions. Although the U.S. labor movement has a long history of racism, sexism, and ableism, unions are currently one of the few organized efforts dedicated to protecting workers from the excesses of capitalism.

Become aware of how class divisions operate in social systems, from workplaces to schools, and how this results in the oppression of blue- and white-collar workers. Find out, for example, if staff at your college or university are paid a living wage, and speak up if they aren't. There is a great silence in this country around issues of class, in part because the dominant cultural ideology presents the United States as a classless society. Break the silence.

Oppose the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the United States and the global economy. The lower, working, and lower-middle classes are the last to benefit from economic upturns and the first to suffer from economic downturns. Press politicians and candidates for public office to take a stand on issues of class, starting with the acknowledgment that they exist.

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When you witness someone else taking a risk—speaking out, calling attention to privilege and oppression—don't wait until later to tell them in private you're glad they did. Waiting until you're alone makes it safer for you but does the other person little good. Support is most needed when the risk is being taken, not later on, so don't wait. Make your support as visible and public as the courageous behavior that you're supporting.

Support the right of women and men to love whomever they choose. Raise awareness of homophobia and heterosexism. For example, ask school officials and teachers about what's happening to gay and lesbian students in local schools. If they don't know, ask them to find out, since it's a safe bet these students are being harassed, suppressed, and oppressed by others at one of the most vulnerable stages of life. When sexual

orientation is discussed, whether in the media or among friends, raise questions about its relation to male privilege. Remember that it isn't necessary to have answers to questions in order to ask them.

Pay attention to how different forms of oppression interact with one another. There has been a great deal of struggle within women's movements, for example, about the relationship between male privilege and privilege in other forms, especially those based on race, social class, and sexual orientation. . . .

One way out of this conflict is to realize that male privilege isn't problematic just because it emphasizes *male* dominance but because it values and promotes dominance and control as ends in themselves. In that sense, all forms of oppression draw support from common roots, and whatever we do that calls attention to those roots undermines *all* forms of privilege. If working against male privilege is seen simply as enabling some women to get a bigger piece of the pie, then some women probably will "succeed" at the expense of others who are disadvantaged by race, class, sexual orientation, and disability status. . . . [I]f we identify the core problem as *any* society organized around principles of domination and privilege, then changing *that* requires us to pay attention to all the forms of privilege those principles promote. Whether we begin with race or gender or disability or class or the capitalist system, if we name the problem correctly we'll wind up going in the same general direction.

Work with other people. This is one of the most important principles of participating in change. From expanding consciousness to taking risks, working with people who support what you're trying to do makes all the difference in the world. . . .

Make contact. Connect to other people engaged in the same work. Do whatever reminds you that you're not alone in this.

It is especially important to form alliances across difference, . . . for whites to listen to people of color, for example—and to give credence to what people say about their own experience. This isn't easy to do, of course, since members of dominant groups may not like what they hear about their privilege from those who are most damaged by it. It is difficult to hear anger and not take it personally, but that is what allies have to be willing to do. It's also difficult for members of privileged groups to realize how mistrusted they are by subordinate groups and to not take that personally as well. . . .

In many ways, the biggest challenge for members of privileged groups is to work with one another on issues of privilege rather than trying to help members of subordinate groups. . . . For members of privileged groups to become allies, they must recall Frederick Douglass's words that "power concedes nothing without a demand" and add their weight to that demand. When dominant groups work against privilege, they do more than add their voices. They also make it more difficult for other members of dominant groups to dismiss calls for change as simply the actions of "special interest groups" trying to better their position.

Don't keep it to yourself. A corollary of looking for company is not to restrict your focus to the tight little circle of your own life. . . . At some point, taking responsibility means acting in a larger context, even if that means letting just one other person know what you're doing. It makes sense to start with yourself, but it's equally important not to end with yourself.

A good way to convert personal change into something larger is to join an organization dedicated to changing the systems that produce privilege and oppression. . . .

If all this sounds overwhelming, remember again that you don't have to deal with everything. You don't have to set yourself the impossible task of transforming society or even yourself. All you can do is what you can *manage* to do, secure in the knowledge that

you're making it easier for other people—now and in the future—to see and do what *they* can do. So, rather than defeat yourself before you start, think small, humble, and doable rather than large, heroic, and impossible. Don't paralyze yourself with impossible expectations. . . .

Don't let other people set the standard for you. Start where you are and work from there. Make lists of all the things you could actually imagine *doing*—from reading another book about privilege to suggesting policy changes at school or work to protesting against capitalism to raising questions about who cleans the bathroom at home—and rank them from the most risky to the least. Start with the least risky and set reasonable goals (“What small risk for change will I take *today*?”). As you get more experienced at taking risks, you can move up your list. You can commit yourself to whatever the next steps are for you, the tolerable risks, the contributions that offer some way—however small it might seem—to help balance the scales. As long as you do something, it counts.

In the end, taking responsibility doesn't have to involve guilt and blame, letting someone off the hook, or being on the hook yourself. It simply means acknowledging an obligation to make a contribution to finding a way out of the trouble we're all in and to finding constructive ways to act on that obligation. You don't have to do anything dramatic or earth-shaking to help change happen. As powerful as systems of privilege are, they cannot stand the strain of lots of people doing something about it, beginning with the simplest act of naming the system out loud.

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The Cycle of Liberation

Bobbie Harro

As people come to a critical level of understanding of the nature of oppression and their roles in this systemic phenomenon, they seek new paths for creating social change and taking themselves toward empowerment or liberation. In my years as a social justice educator, it became increasingly clear that most socially conscious people truly want to “do something about” the injustices that they see and they recognize that simple, personal-level changes are not enough. They want to know how to make system-level change manageable and within their grasp, and they often become frustrated since so little has been written about the process of liberation.

As more students asked, “How do we make a dent in this thing that seems so big?” I began to think about how we might consciously transform the Cycle of Socialization. The Cycle “teaches” us how to play our roles in oppression, and how to revere the existing systems that shape our thinking, leading us to blame uncontrollable forces, other people, or ourselves for the existence of oppression. If there is an identifiable pattern of events that repeats itself, becomes self-fulfilling, and leads us to a state of unconsciousness about issues of oppression, then there may be another identifiable pattern of events that leads us toward liberation from that thinking. I began to read about and study efforts to eliminate oppression on a systemic level, and discovered that indeed, some