

The Invisibility of



Upper Class Privilege



by *Class Acts*

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In Class Acts (a program exploring issues of spirituality, ethics and theology for women of wealth), we spent a significant amount of time looking at the relationship of racism to class elitism. We have used "The Invisibility of White Privilege," developed by Peggy MacIntosh as a resource for our work. In Class Acts II we decided to draw up a list of "invisible" class privileges, using the work on racism as a model. The following list is a group effort. We are aware that each point represents a pitfall for all members of our class and each point is more or less applicable to all of us.

- I can manage to know only people of similar class background by exclusively frequenting places where such people gather — neighborhoods, schools, clubs, workplaces, etc.
- I can avoid people of other classes and races if I choose.
- I evaluate others and recognize those of similar background because I was taught to do that kind of evaluation.
- I assume I will be able to meet my basic needs. I take having necessities for granted.
- I buy what I need/want without worry.
- I do not fear being hungry or homeless.
- I am free of the burden of debt.
- I have the freedom to waste.
- I can hide family secrets and family failures behind the doors of my home.
- I am in control of how I spend my time.
- I have leisure if I want.
- I can be as private as I choose to be.
- I can be charitable or not as I choose.
- I have the time, education, and opportunity to enhance my inner life and my personal growth, to go to therapy (without having to rely on insurance), and go to retreats and workshops as much as I like.
- I can sleep all day and still make money.
- I can often get things by being "charming," gracious, and restrained.
- I can live where I choose and can move when and where I choose.
- I can expect that I will be welcomed where I choose to live. (Exceptions might be for landlords/neighbors who distrust single women or lesbians.)
- When I am in the company of people of my class in any social situation I have little discomfort.
- I can join clubs that are unavailable to many others.
- I feel entitled to maintain the exclusivity of my clubs by banning others from membership based on criteria the club determines: race, gender, education, money, religion, etc.
- In my community I am trusted and not perceived as a threat.

- I am believed to be innocent by the criminal justice system at least until proven guilty.
- I have the opportunity to problem solve efficiently and quickly through access to powerbrokers.
- I can avoid spending time with people whom I have am trained or have learned to mistrust and who may have learned to mistrust my kind.
- I can buy things for my comfort or luxury.
- I can buy items (art, antiques, rugs jewelry, first designer clothing, cars, boats, multiple, houses, etc.) that imply wealth and status.
- If I break or lose something I can replace it easily.
- I can shop where I choose, in areas and buildings where I feel safe, where I am not likely to be hassled by security guards or the public, where I don't have to stand in line, and where sales personnel will give me time and personal attention.
- I do not have to shop around for the best buy or wait for sales.
- I do not have to worry about how emergencies will impact my spending requirements.
- I have the time and financial resources to care for my body.
- I can live a less stressful life because I can afford costly short cuts.
- I can employ people to help with the tasks of daily living.
- I can employ people to care for my children.
- I can see myself as being above doing housework.
- I can give lavish parties.
- I anticipate that those whom I employ will consider me a "good customer" and give me preferential service; I can even feel entitled to such service.
- I can treat the people I employ in ways that deny them personal respect.
- Culture is at my fingertips: I can go to any museum, concert, recital, play, opera, or musical event when and wherever I want.
- Entertainment is easily available to me.
- I can take vacations when and where I want.
- I can frequent exclusive hotels, clubs, restaurants, and vacation locales that give luxurious service.
- I can travel to exotic places and enjoy a wide variety of experience.
- I can afford good medical and hospital care.
- I can afford good mental health care in a setting which will insure my privacy.
- I can anticipate my retirement years without financial anxiety.
- I can assert that I deserve and am entitled to those privileges.
- I can give my children an inheritance so their road is easier

than the road of others.

- People of my class usually do what we want when we want; we are often free not to do what someone else wants us to do.
- I could probably advance my career or social contacts by pulling strings.
- I and others like me have the advantage of suitable clothing and manner when seeking employment.
- I and others like me have the advantage of networking amongst those with decision-making power when seeking employment.
- I can choose to work or not to work, and for the most part not be criticized or attacked for that choice.
- I can follow a career path that does not pay well.
- I can get a loan/mortgage at a bank with little nuisance.
- I usually have access to services provided by highly qualified service providers.
- I can choose to make my privileged position as visible or invisible as I want, depending on the situation in which I find myself.
- In a group of relative strangers, but fellow class members, certain assumptions about my/our background, financial position, education, network of friends/family, and behavior will be made.
- I have a seat at the table to make, influence, have an impact on decisions, rules, policy.
- I can keep people from knowing my feelings and be inscrutable, when it is advantageous because I was trained to do that.
- Because I can have an attitude of entitlement, I may have an attitude of contempt toward those who have not succeeded according to my definition of success.
- I have the freedom to be unaware of the living conditions of others.
- I have the freedom to be unaware of the working conditions of others.
- I have the freedom to be unaware of the financial hardships of others.
- I have the freedom to overlook the feelings of others regarding my lack of feeling/awareness.
- I can dismiss viewpoints which differ from my own.
- I can be ignorant about money in general and my own finances in particular.
- I can choose to be uninformed about the news and it doesn't really affect my daily life.
- I can boast/name drop about my ancestors as if their accomplishments entitled me to prestige and social standing.
- I can afford to have very idealistic and "politically correct" views.

Dr. Joan Martin, while speaking at the Theological Opportunities

Program at Harvard, made the point that we are identified with others of our class/race no matter how diligently we might have worked to enlarge our understanding and broaden our fields of awareness and action. With that in mind, each member of the group was asked to suggest class actions/attitudes with which we might be associated:

- My people have named our country a democracy, overlooking the definition of democracy and how it fails the life possibilities of many in our society.
- My people have the power to name the problems facing our society and to deny the problems that others in our society might name.
- My people determine what solutions will be made available to solve the problems they have named.
- My people determine if resources will be made available to solve problems others have named.
- My people understand ourselves as leaders — leaders of industry, politics, education, medicine, law, religion.
- As leaders, my people define what is normative and develop theory, policy, and standards to conform to our own definitions, including in the fields of developmental theory, behavior, manners, values, performance, theology (stressing the "redemptive value" of suffering), learning, testing, and ways of learning/knowing. These theories, definitions, behaviors, policies, and standards are presented as what is worthy and real; other definitions are minimized as not accurately naming reality.
- My people, as political executives, name self-protective politically expedient acts as acts of principle.
- My people, as executives and politicians, bend or break the law for self advantage and self protection.
- My people, as legislators, enact laws that benefit people like me.
- My people, as legislators, sell tax benefits.
- My people, as legislators, expect a payback for political and tax favors.
- My people, as consumers, buy tax and other advantage through contributions (financial and otherwise) to legislators.
- My people, as criminals, buy silence and legal protection.
- My people, as lawyers, sell legal protection.
- My people think we are entitled to preferential treatment, especially in relation to the law.
- My people, as physicians and health executives, control the allocation of medical and health resources.
- My people have wide networks of friends to whom we can turn for assistance in any number of situations — legal, business, employment, admission to exclusive clubs, etc.
- My people, because we have given favors to others, expect and receive favors in return.

- My people believe we are entitled to have and distribute social acceptance and that we control the "pecking order" in society.
- My people, as business executives, often do not pay adequate wages to employees, especially the working labor force.
- My people, as business executives, often exploit women and children workers.
- My people, as business executives, often do not design the work place to ensure the health and humanity of the workers.
- My people, often understand the labor force as a budget item instead of as individuals with needs and hopes.
- My people, as business executives, sometimes move jobs/factories to new locations in anticipation of higher profits and/or to take advantage of tax breaks, cheaper labor, lower environmental standards, a "more favorable" working environment.
- My people, as business executives, often pay ourselves enormous salaries, bonuses, stock options, and other financial perks — club memberships, private car, plane, etc.
- My people, as business executives, are often given multi-million dollar severance packages when our employment is terminated because we have failed to fulfill the requirements of our position.
- My people, as business executives, often terminate the employment of workers with little notice and little to no "severance package."
- My people, as business executives, encourage irresponsible consumerism in order to increase company sales and profits.
- Private property is a top priority of my people.
- My people view all these privileges as entitlements and are concerted with maintaining them.
- My people resist change.
- My people do not shoulder their responsibility to and on behalf of society to assist it in functioning for the common good and operating with justice for all.

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