

# MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

60 Masonic St. Northampton, MA 01060 | TEL 800.897.0089 | info@mediaed.org | [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)

## *The Pathology of Privilege* *Racism, White Denial & the Costs of Inequality*

Transcript

### INTRODUCTION

**TIM WISE:** I want to thank all of you for coming out. I want to start off by telling you that I think it is probably a good idea when somebody stands in front of you and is proclaimed by virtue of their bio and by virtue of their curriculum vitae, their resume, that part of which is read to you, by way of their nice comments made of them by others, proclaim to be an expert. Ask yourself why it is that you are listening to that person and not somebody else. In this culture, we are lead to believe that if someone stands before you, a proclaimed expert, that it must be that they are the brightest bulbs in the box – that they know something that the other people don't know.

I am not standing in front of you, and you are not listening to me, because I am the most informed person in the country on racism or white privilege, not because I am the best speaker on the subject. I am fairly good, and I intend to demonstrate that to you amply in the next hour. It isn't because I am the best writer on the subject, though I am ok with that as well. It is instead because I, and I know this, fit the aesthetic that is needed on too many campuses and too many communities around the country in order to come in and give this talk.

Nothing that I am going to say tonight, or at least very little, originated in my head. Nothing that I am going to say tonight, or at least very little, is in fact new. Almost every single thing that I am going to say this evening is wisdom that has been shared with me either patiently, or sometimes not so patiently, by people of color who have in almost every instance forgotten more about the subjects of racism and white privilege since breakfast yesterday than I will likely ever know, and yet they will not be asked to give eighty five engagements around the country this year or next on this subject. Not because they have not the wisdom to do it but because privilege, the subject that I'll deal with tonight, bestows upon me that advantage, and so, as a matter of responsibility and accountability, I have to own that up front so that when you go away from this, this evening, thinking to yourself, "My goodness that was good," and that is my subliminal way of telling you that you are going to think its just great. And when you go away from here thinking that I have filled your heads with all this great knowledge and wisdom, please know that it is not mine. And then, next time you hear it from a person of color,

the next time it is shared with you, for those in the audience particularly who are white, the next time it is shared with you by a person of color, as it will be and as it has been in one form or another, please listen to it, and please know that it is from that source that I get virtually all of my material. We will know that we have made progress only on that day when a person of color can get up and give the talk that I am about to give and be taken half as seriously as I expect to be taken.

## THE ERASURE OF RACE IN POLITICS & CULTURE

**WISE:** It is interesting to see so many people come out to these events because, to hear some people tell it, you would think that this conversation was almost wholly unnecessary. To pay attention to the American political process, and what the candidates for this nation's highest office have to say and not say about the issues that are of importance to them and thus we are to presume importance to the Nation, you would get the impression that the issue of race, that the issue of racism, that the issue of discrimination, and certainly that the issue of white racial privilege were non-existent issues; that they were of really no importance, or that of very little importance, because you will not hear and have not heard any of the candidates for the presidency of the United States, in either party, of whatever political ideology, make this an issue. Yes, they talk about poverty and occasionally they talk about schooling and education. They talk about healthcare. They talk about all of those things, but not once have any of those candidates tried to directly connect the role that racism, the role that racial discrimination, the role that institutional racial oppression and white privilege play in regard to health care, in regard to housing, in regard to schooling. It is as if those issues exist in a vacuum and have no relationship to color, have no relationship to race, have no relationship to a history of racial subordination.

What does it say, about our Nation's political process, and about our Nation's political and social culture, that none of these candidates for political office has seen fit to tell the American public the following things? All of which you would think would be campaign issues of some importance, at least to some people, and yet they won't say them. Why is it that none of them mention, that it was last year, 2006, not 1996, not 1986, not 1976, or 1966, but 2006 which witnessed the highest number of race based housing discrimination complaints in recorded history? The fair housing act was passed in 1968, the year of my birth, and yet it was not 1968 that witnessed the highest level of discrimination complaints based on race. It was 38 years later, in 2006.

What does it say about our culture and the politicians, the choices we've been given for leader of the so-called free world, that none of these candidates sees fit to mention, as they talk about health care, which is a subject they do talk about with some regularity, what does it say that none of them mention the research that was published in the American Journal of Public Health in 2004, which had looked at ten years of excess mortality data for African Americans, from 1991-2000, looking at the number of black

folks who had died above and beyond the number that would have died, but for their blackness, in effect, and the social and economic conditions that ascribe and essentially adhere to blackness in this country? And what they found in this study, which received almost no media attention again, published in an academic journal, not read by the average American, not read by political candidates, read by doctors and people who research the health care industry, but that's about it. This study found that between 1991 and 2000, there were almost one million black people in this country who died who would not have died had they merely been white and had the average health care quality and access of the typical white person in this country, had they been living in neighborhoods, like white neighborhoods, in which the levels of exposure to toxicity had been as low as it is in the typical white neighborhood, as opposed to excess exposure to toxics, pollutants, etc. in black and brown spaces. Almost one million excess dead people, in this case black folks, who wouldn't have died had the system of health care access and exposure to toxins been equal between white folks and black folks. How is a million dead black people not news? You see, if James Bird gets dragged to death behind a truck in Jasper, Texas, you will hear about that and well you should. If one individual is the victim of a vicious hate crime, you will hear about that and well you should. But if nearly one million people die, not because of bigotry, not because of hatred, not because of some white supremacy organization, but because of systemic and institutionalized injustice, you will not hear anything.

How is it not news, and why are no candidates mentioning, that according to the department of justice, in a study released in 2004, black and Latino males are three times more likely than white males to have their cars stopped and searched for drugs – even though white males are four and half times more likely to actually have drugs on us on the occasion when we are stopped. Now think about that. Because that suggests racial profiling is not just racist. That is redundant. But it is also pretty stupid-ass law enforcement. Or is it? Because I guess it is only stupid if you think the war on drugs is actually to get drugs off the street. Because if that were the purpose, putting aside that whether or not we ought to deal with a medical and a health problem known as drug addiction with war metaphors in the first place – different lecture for a different night. Even if we assume that that is a good policy, let us be clear that that is not what we're fighting. We are not fighting a war on drugs because the first rule of any war is to go where the enemy is, and if the white folks are the ones with the drugs in the car and the black and brown folks are the ones that are getting stopped, the people fighting this war are either supremely stupid or just have really bad short term memory. Like they keep forgetting, "Oh damn, I pulled over another guy named Martinez! Gar! I keep forgetting. It's white people. It's white people. Damn it! I got to write a note, and put it on the dashboard. I don't know what's wrong with me." Maybe that's it, you know. Or maybe it's something else.

I do training with law enforcement. Not a hell of a lot, for reasons you can probably guess. And I ask law enforcement officers, "What is the first thing you think when you see a young black or Latino male driving a nice car in your neighborhood?" And they all,

without fail and exception, will say, “Drug dealer.” I then ask them, “What’s the first thing you think when you see a young white male, same age, driving the same type of car, in that same community?” And they will say without exception, without hesitation, without fail, “Spoiled little rich kid. Daddy probably bought him a car.” Keep in mind we have been together for about 90 seconds of the workshop at this point. We have about 2 hours left, and they just outed themselves as racists. Because what they have just said is that they are making snap judgments on the basis of only color that work to the detriment of people of color and the benefit of white people. We still have two hours to go so you know it’s going to be fun from that point forward. These are people sworn in to protect and to serve. It’s right there on the car. Right there on the side of the car, and in the first 90 seconds they are acknowledging this racial bias. How is this not an issue? How is it not an issue that according to that justice department report, while black and brown folk are having their wheel wells ripped apart on the side of the road, their trunks splayed open, their dashboards ripped apart, all in the search for drugs that aren’t even there, white people like me – notice I said ‘like me’ because I am not trying to tell you anything about me that you don’t need to know, and for which the statute of limitations has not yet expired, are driving by the road block with a trunk full of weed, and we’re just waving. Because we are not suspected, therefore we are not detected. Therefore we are not punished. How is that not an issue?

How is it not an issue that the typical white family in America, thanks to this history, this legacy of institutionalized oppression for some and advantage and privilege for others, how is it not news that the average white family in America, not the average rich white family, the average white family has 12 times the accumulated net worth of the average African American family, 8 times the accumulated net worth of the average Latino family, and in large measure because those white average families had parents or grandparents who even if they didn’t have much, even if they were not rich none the less were bale to procure a little house, with a little property, maybe with a F.H.A. or a V.A. loan. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, loans that were all but off limits to people of color, as they gave hundreds of billions of dollars worth of assets and equity to those who were white. So that even white working class families, on average, even white families with less than fifteen thousand a year in annual income, which depending on family size, that is technically the poverty limit, and yet the average family with low income, less than fifteen thousand, has the same average net worth as a typical black family with a sixty thousand or more in annual income. So that even in those African American families that are professionals – good jobs, occupation status, good educations, etc. and pretty good incomes – are still in worse shape in terms of wealth and assets, material goods, which are really what matter in the long run, your income, if you’re dependant on that you are one paycheck away from nothing. If you don’t have assets, if you don’t have wealth, if you don’t have something accumulated, your income means very little in the case of an economic downturn. And these working class white families who are struggling, make no mistake about it, nonetheless are going to be better off than those black families who make four times as much annual pay. How can that not be an issue? I am suggesting to you that the failure to talk about race, the

failure to talk about racism and inequality on the basis of color, feeds the denial that is already far too prevalent among the white community. And having been white all of my life, I have been surrounded by that denial for a very long time.

## WHITE DENIAL

**WISE:** A few years back, white Americans were asked whether or not we believe that racial discrimination was still a significant national problem for people of color, or whether it was just a problem, you know, like junk mail, wrong phone number at two in the morning, you can't get back to sleep, it's raining, and you want to go outside for a jog. You know, a problem, but one you'll get over. Whether it wasn't much of a problem wasn't a problem at all, or we just weren't sure. They also asked black and brown folk this question. Folks of color, it won't surprise you, said yes, it is a significant problem actually, and not just because I read about it in a sociology textbook. I have actually lived it and would be more than happy to tell you what kind of problem it's been. But these were pollsters; they didn't care about that. They just wanted the yes or no. Then they were on to the next house. Then they asked white folks: Is it or is it not a significant national problem, racial discrimination for people of color and against people of color, and only six percent, 6 out of 100, said yes, that it was a significant national problem. Just to give you an idea as to how bad that is: I would have you compare it to a survey taken a few years earlier where approximately 12 percent of white Americans said we believed there was a fairly decent chance that Elvis Presley might still be alive.

I don't know how good you are at math. I, myself, am not that good. But that is a ratio that I can calculate. What that means is that white Americans are twice as likely to believe that Elvis might still be alive then we are to believe what people of color tell us they experience on a fairly regular basis. That is denial so profound as to boggle the mind, but there it is. And the people who are saying it are not mean-spirited. They are not hard-hearted. They are not bad people. I firmly believe that most people are good people. I could be wrong about this, but I have two little girls, ages 6 and 4, and I choose as a parent to believe that most people are good. If you have evidence of the contrary, keep it to yourself. I do not want to know it or hear it this evening. What I do know is that those individuals who said that, as well-meaning as they may have been, that they really didn't see it as a significant problem, aren't new in their denial. See, it is one thing for young people to think that the problem is solved. I almost get that. I almost understand it. Because if you're under the age of 25, maybe even under the age of 35, you know, what we tend to tell younger people about this history, and about this legacy, is what we see in the grainy black and white footage every MLK day, or maybe during black history month.

If I were to ask you, "Do you believe that folks of color had equal opportunity and were treated equally in 1963, or whether or not black children were treated equally in schools and had equally educational opportunity in 1962, I know right now no one in here would

say, “Well, of course, naturally they did in 1963. That was a damn good year to be black or brown in America.” Everyone regardless of your opinion in 2007 would quickly acknowledge how bad it was back in the day, because it is no sweat off your back. Forty four, forty five years later, it’s easy to talk about how bad it was, but see, here’s the trick: What do you think those white folks said when those very questions were put to them in 1963, and in 1962, in a time where the apartheid system was very much in effect? It was before the Civil Rights act, before the fair voting acts, before the fair housing act. In retrospect, we can all look back and say how profoundly unequal it was, and yet when white folks were asked, some of them our parents, our grandparents, great uncles great aunts. These ancestors of ours were asked the very same question in 1963. “Do you think people of color” – they didn’t use that term, they said racial minorities – “Do you think that racial minorities are treated equally in your community?” And 80% of white folks said yes.

In 1962, when Gallup asked, “Do you think that black children receive equal educational opportunities in your community?” 90% of white folks said yes. Nothing to see here. What is all this complaining? What is this march on Washington? I don’t get it. I don’t understand it. In fact, the very month of that march, which now it seems every white liberal wants you to think they were at. The very month of that march, white folks were asked by Newsweek what they thought about it. They said, 2/3 of whites said, that Dr. King and the Movement were pushing too far too fast, asking for too much and too soon. The idea that this country was ready to hear this even at this time when we know how vicious it was, is a lie. What does it mean that white folks were in denial in 1962 and 63? What does it say if you go back to the 30s and asked the question? Do you think white folks were clear then? The 1890s? What did white folks say? Those Southern editors of newspapers where I’m from would say, “Well, we get along just fine with our Negroes down here. If you Yankees would just leave us alone and stop messing with our business.” Go back to 1850 and read what Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a well respected member of the medical profession in this country, said: not only was racism not a problem, well there wasn’t even a word for that yet, but slavery wasn’t a problem so much so that he decided that any slave that would run away obviously had a mental illness – because you’d have to be crazy to run away from bondage. So he came up with a term. He called it drapdementia. I don’t even know what the root of that word is, but that’s what he called it. You must be crazy, you must be mentally ill, to run away from your loving master. Denial, in every generation: 2007, 1963, the 30s, the 1890s, the 1850s. My point being that, in every generation, the members of the dominant group have said there is no problem, and in every generation, without fail, we have been wrong. And in every generation, people of color, those who were the targets of that oppression and subordination, have said there is a problem, and in every generation, without fail, they have been right.

So the question for us today, what are the odds, honestly, that people of color, who have never gotten it wrong, have suddenly, lost their freaking minds? And have suddenly become unable to see truth and to separate it from fiction. And counter to that,

what are the odds that white folks who have never gotten it right yet have suddenly become highly, highly perceptive? The odds are pretty long, and again it's not because white folks are insensitive, or hard-hearted, let alone stupid, but it is that those of us who are white have the luxury of not knowing black and brown truth. We don't know because we don't have to know. We are not tested on it. If I don't know what people of color experience, what happens to me in this country? Virtually nothing. But if people of color don't know my reality, if people of color don't know white reality better than white folks have to know it, if they cannot regurgitate it to us better than we would ever be able to regurgitate it to ourselves, all hell breaks loose. So people of color are going to have to know white history, white literature, white art, white theatre, white poetry, white drama. I know we don't call it that. That's sort of the point.

When your stuff is the stuff against which everybody else's stuff is compared and found lacking, you don't have to name it. It's just the norm. That's why, for those still confused, we don't have white history month because we have several. They go by the names of May, June, July, August, September, pretty much any month that we have not designated as someone else's month, that's white history month. But we take it for granted, because we don't have to know other folks' reality. That's a privilege. That's an advantage. That's a head start, and it's one we must think about. See, that's the other piece of this, right? Because it's one thing for white folks to acknowledge racism, see? Because you know white liberals will, god bless them, white liberals will acknowledge racism is real. "Oh my goodness, we should do something about that. Yes, yes, we should. It's terrible that racial profiling, that housing discrimination. My goodness, it's awful. Yes it is." But just because we acknowledge racism and discrimination, doesn't mean we'll acknowledge the flip side of that. It doesn't mean that we will acknowledge that for everyone who is targeted by that discrimination that exists that we are willing to admit exists. There is somebody else not being targeted, guess whom? And that those individuals that are elevated by definition and receive an advantage, receive a subsidy, receive a privilege in the process, you see? We like to talk about those who are down as if there is no up. We like to use language that obscures the interrelationship of down and up. Now down has no meaning without an up. It is a relative term. But we talk about those at the bottom of the hierarchy, not paying attention to the fact that for anyone who is down, someone is above them and they are above them because they are down. We use this language, that makes it impossible, and when I say we, I am not talking about like right-wing folk. I'm not even talking about them. I'm talking about nice liberal caring service providers. People who just want to help. "I just want to help the underprivileged." That's the word we use. I've used it before. I don't use it any more, except in a speech like this. We just want to help the underprivileged, but what's wrong with that word, folks?

At least two things. They ought to be pretty obvious to you. Number one is: it's a passively constructed term. It's the passive voice, as my English teacher would say. Underprivileged doesn't imply that anybody did anything to anyone. It's just: there's privilege, and I would be damned. There you are under it. If we could just figure out how

you got down there, we could solve all of the problems of the Western World. But we don't want to know how you got down there. No, that's why we came up with that bumper sticker, 'Stuff Happens.' That's the G-rated version. That's a bumper sticker that only a straight white upper middle class male could have made. Because anyone who isn't straight, anyone who isn't male, anyone who isn't white, anyone who isn't upper middle class knows that stuff doesn't just happen. Stuff gets done by people to people. Nothing is a coincidence. Nothing is random. This isn't osmosis. And so we act as if it's this passive thing, but yet that's not the case.

The second problem with the term underprivileged is even bigger than the first one. It's that it's a relative term. Again, this is grammar. Man, you don't like this. You can disagree with anything else I have to say tonight. If you have a problem with this piece right here, you must take it up with your third grade grammar teacher, because it is not on me. If we use the word underprivileged, then by definition, there must be an overprivileged. But we don't use that word in polite conversation. Indeed it does not even exist. If you don't believe me, go back to your Residence Hall, go back to your apartment, go back to your home, go back to your place of employment, and tomorrow punch in two little words: the first one, underprivileged. Make no mistake. Your spell check is going to recognize that word. It's in their dictionary. They can give you the definition. They can give you the synonym. They can give you the antonym. They can show you the phonetic way in which you should spell it. Now come down one line, type in overprivileged. And watch how fast that little red line pops up. That line that says, "nope, you're an idiot." Making up words that don't exist, try again and get back to us. But if there is an underprivileged, there must be an overprivileged. Why don't we talk about it? Because that would require that we acknowledge that if there are two to three million people being targeted for race-based housing discrimination because they are people of color every year, that is two to three million places I can live. If people of color are being targeted and profiled and I'm not, that is an advantage. It may or may not have material consequences. Lots of privilege isn't about material acquisitions, so please know this. When I talk about white privilege, I don't even mean money, necessarily. For some it definitely does translate to money. For some it has certainly meant that. But even for those white folks who don't have that money, white privilege is real at the psychological level.

## UNBURDENED BY RACE

**WISE:** I grew up for the first eighteen years of my life in an 850 square foot apartment. The plumbing was always leaking. The air condition was constantly busted. We had no savings. We ran cars into the ground until they just stopped running, took no vacations, had no assets, had no credit that wasn't bad credit. So I was one of those white folks who certainly didn't have class privilege, and yet I had the knowledge that I was perceived in school as highly capable, not because of my class background, which was no great shakes, but because I was seen as a bright capable white child, while students



of color who were every bit as capable as I were tracked low, while I was tracked high. I could make bad grades, and I never seemed to fall out of favor in those types of classes because I was seen as simply underperforming, not quite living up to my standards. So I received the psychological edge of knowing that, in those classrooms, that if I didn't do well, and I often didn't, I wasn't a bad student. But if I didn't do well, I never had to worry that that would be ascribed to my race. I never had to worry that someone would say, "well of course, he isn't good at that because, you know, he is white." Because you know, unless I was going to be trying out for a job that required jumping or dancing, what stereotype exactly is working against me as a white person? There aren't many, but for people of color it's a whole different ball game, knowing that if they under perform in an academic environment, knowing that if they end a sentence with a preposition, when they answer that question in class or if they mispronounce a word, or if they simply answer the question wrong, they have to wonder whether they dropped the ball, not just for themselves, but for all those coming after them, who look like them, whose presence on that campus, or on that job complex, or in that office, is constantly under scrutiny, constantly being questioned, constantly being second guessed. Do they really belong here? That is what it means to be white. It's never having to worry that you are going to trigger a series of negative stereotypes about your group and if you are not able to over come them, your opportunities will be limited. Yes, white women will face that on a gender level, but on a racial level, those who are white will never have to worry that their missteps, that our missteps, will be attributed to our racial defect of some sort. The research is very clear, that that privilege, having one less thing to worry about, having one less thing to sweat in the classroom, trying to get that loan at the bank, at that job or whatever that case might be, that that has significant dividends because to have one less thing to sweat in a competitive society is the thing that separates often times success from failure or big success from medium success from smaller success.

And the research is very clear. In the academic environment, in particular, those persons who are constantly having to worry about whether or not their performance is going to trigger that negative group stereotype, that the mere anxiety caused by worrying about that is enough to drive down their academic performance on standardized testing and classroom performance, even when they are equally or better qualified than their counterparts who don't have to think about that. So it's a huge advantage to have that one less thing to concern oneself with. To not have the burden of representation, to not have to in the parlance of the modern era hold it down for white people. Because we as white folks know we don't have to do that. We also know what other white people do won't stick to us. We have 19 men who happen to be Arab and Muslim who fly planes into buildings, and we have otherwise rational human beings running around insisting that we should stop and search everyone like them at the airports. We did not do this, or anything remotely like it, when Tim McVeigh and Terry Nichols brought down the Building in Oklahoma City, nor would we have. We didn't do it when the Unabomber, crazy ass white man in the woods of Montana, blowing people up for 20 years before they caught him. It didn't stick to the rest of us who are white men. The Olympic Park bomber, Eric Rudolph, puts a bomb in Olympic Village in Atlanta in

1996, blows up a gay bar, blows up a family planning clinic. He too then runs off into the woods. As a side note: I have no idea what it is about white people and the woods. But whatever it is, it probably explains why black folks don't do a lot of camping.

So it doesn't stick to us. There have been about 105 family planning centers, some of which provide abortion services, many of which do not, that have been bombed or burned in the last 20 years, and every single one of them according to the FBI have been white. They have mostly been men. They claim to be Christian. Different lecture for a different night. 125 or more, 125 plus McVeigh and Nichols is 127, unabomber is 128. Eric Rudolph is 129. 129 confirmed terrorists who are white in this country in the last 20 years. It sticks to nobody who's white. 19 Arab Muslims, and it sticks to everyone who either 700 million Arab folk on the planet, 1.5 billion Muslims on the planet. To assume that we know something about them, based on the acts of 19 is to commit what any statistician would tell you is sampling error. It is mathematical illiterately. And yet we do it because we can.

Privilege: Not having to worry about it. But let me suggest to you something, because the title of this talk after all is *The Pathology of Privilege*. I want to be very clear, that that privilege of not having to think about it, that privilege of not having to know someone else's reality, that privilege of being able to ignore it, and that privilege of benefiting from the inequality, having a certain leg up actually is very dangerous. And not just for those who don't have it, that there is actually a down side for those who do, and this is important, right? Because in a country like ours, which encourages us to take advantage of our advantages, if I tell you that you have a privilege, your first inclination is not to get rid of that. That's not the culture in which we live. But I want to suggest to you there are reasons for even those of us who benefit, in relative terms, from racism and institutional white supremacy, should care about this. Not out of some altruistic – I want to help other people impulse – but because it is actually dangerous for us as well.

## **THE CREATION OF WHITENESS: How Race Was Used to Hide Class**

**WISE:** Because if you know the history of the whole concept of whiteness, if you know the history of the concept of the white race, where it came from and for what reason, you know it was a trick, and it's worked brilliantly. You see, prior to the mid 1600s, in the colonies of what would become the United States, there was no such thing as the white race. Those of us of European decent did not refer to ourselves in that term really ever before then. In fact, in the old countries of Europe, we had spent most of our time killing each other. We didn't love each other. We weren't one big happy family. The side of my family that comes from Scotland, hell, they didn't even worry about fighting people outside of Scotland. Highlanders and lowlanders just fought the hell out of each other.

So there was no white race. But in the colonies that would become the United States, what did we see in the 1660s, the 1670s? We began to see the Africans of indentured

servant status, many of them not enslaved yet. They were not necessarily permanently enslaved. Some others were indentured, like many poor Europeans, for periods of 7-11 years. They could work off their indenture, and then they would be free labor, technically. Realize, as did the white indentured servants, the Europeans, who hadn't even been called white yet, that they had a lot of things in common, like the fact that they were all getting their clock cleaned by the elite, and so they would get together, more than our history books taught us, to ferment rebellion, against the elite to try to get a better deal for themselves on the basis of economic necessity and economic justice. And what did the elite do when you see that you are out numbered by black and white folks who are penniless, landless, peasants? You have to do one of two things: You either have to kill them all. But you can't do that, because who is going to work? Rich folks are not going to work. They had to get poor people to work. The whole point was to be a person of leisure. That was the goal, was not to work. So you couldn't kill them all. You didn't want to kill them all. You'd have to do the work yourself. You'd have to build your own levy, build your own house, pick your own tobacco, harvest your own cotton. You aren't going to do any of that. So you can't kill them, but you can coop them. And so the elite in Virginia, for example, begins to give certain carrots to people of European decent, saying things like, "you know, we are going to let you own a little land. Not much, but just a little, and we are going to get rid of indentured servitude. Now you are a free laborer." And by the way, once you are a free laborer, you get 50 acres of land just because you are a free laborer. "So we are going to cut you in on this deal. We are going to let you enter into contract. We are going to let you testify in courts. And here's the best of all, we are going to put you on the slave patrol, to keep those people in line." The idea was: you're still going to get your clock cleaned. We still don't like you. We still aren't going to really empower you or change your economic subordination, but we are going to make you honorary members of this team, and you are going to help us keep those other people down. And so they got a little taste of power. And it did effectively divide and conquer those coalitions. Those rebellions began to stop, almost instantly.

Fast forward to the civil war era. You have rich white folks in the couth, where I come from, standing up and admitting that the reason they are willing to succeed from the union, and the only reason they ever articulated publicly ever, was to maintain and extend slavery and white supremacy. Not only where it already existed, but into the newly acquired, that is to say, stolen territories, from Mexico to the west. Now we lie about it, and say it wasn't about slavery, and say it was about states' rights. Yes, the right of the states to keep and maintain slaves, exactly. But back then, they had no shame. So they didn't try to cover it up. They openly said it. But once again, the rich didn't want to go do the work, are you kidding? No. They are going to get poor people to go fight for them. And the poor folks didn't even own slaves. Now think, how do you get poor people who don't even own the shirt on their back, let alone slaves, to go fight to go keep your slaves for you? You've got to convince them that their skin is more important than their economic interest. Because, think about it. If I am a farmer who has to charge you a dollar a day, or two dollars a week to work on your farm, and harvest that tobacco or pick that cotton, but you can get a black person to do it for free because

you own them, whose going to get the job? Not me. In other words, slavery actually undermined the wages and the wage based the economic floor of the typical white working class, or low-income person. But they were told, "If these people are free, they are going to take your jobs." No fool. They've got your job. That's the point.

And so at some level, working class white people are being harmed by white privilege. Relatively being advantaged, right? Being given a leg up, being given a membership to the club, but in absolute terms, being kept economically subordinated by the very thing that gave them a sense of superiority. How's that for irony? Then in the present era, this hasn't stopped. This is not ancient history. Now we have people running around insisting that we should close the borders with Mexico, because if we don't the wages of working class people will continue to fall. The implication being that the only reason workers are paid like crap in this county is because the border is open. But if you believe that, you would actually have to believe that if that border were closed that all these owners of capital and industry would just say, "Oh well, you figured us out, here, it's a raise." Do we really believe that the only thing keeping bosses from paying people more is the presence of low-waged, medium-skilled labor from south of this artificial border? Is that really what we believe? We know that if that border is closed it isn't going to be closed to capital. It isn't going to be closed to goods. If you have a border that can be crossed by capital, looking for the highest return on investment or goods looking for the highest price, but labor is chained to its country of origin, how is that going to work for the benefit of working people? By definition, it doesn't. By definition, it eviscerates the worker class. Divide and conquer.

But the best example of all, perhaps in the contemporary era, in the greater New Orleans area after Katrina. Here you have two communities that were the most hard hit. Lower ninth ward, mostly black community, 94% African American, about 40% official poverty rate, heavy working class community. And right across the canal, St. Bernard Parish, Chalmette, 95% white, also working class, high levels of poverty. Economically very similar, and at the end of the day, in those first few days in September 2005, more similar than they probably would have realized, because when those levees broke, they all got their stuff jacked. They all got their stuff destroyed, but if you had asked in Chalmette, and I've done it, who was the cause of the problems in the greater New Orleans area prior to that flooding, they would have pointed across that canal at those black folks, wouldn't have called them black folks, and would have said, there, that's the problem. 70% of the white folks in Saint Bernard Parish voted for David Duke, white supremacist neo-Nazi, former head of the largest Ku Klux Klan group in the United States, when he ran for Governor in 1991. 7 out of 10 gladly voted for him, because he was blaming black folks for all of their problems, and they bought it. What's the irony? The irony is that while they were blaming black people for their problems, while they were blaming black people for the conditions of the greater New Orleans area in which they lived, nobody was paying attention, and least of all they, to the fact that these white elite politicians either in Baton Rouge or in Washington, whose job it was to secure those levees, to make sure that levy funds were spent in the proper way, and that they

were spent at all. Those mostly white and mostly elite politicians did nothing at the end of the day, and it wasn't just those black folks in the lower ninth ward they didn't care about. They really couldn't have given a rat's ass about those poor and working class white folks either. And yet when the people of Chalmette, people of St. Bernard parish got back into session, first time they had a city council meeting, a parish council meeting after the flooding; the lights aren't even on yet; the water isn't even hooked up and first order of business was to pass an ordinance, saying that you couldn't rent property in St. Bernard parish to anyone who wasn't a blood relative. Now I'll leave it to your imagination as to why you'd want to pass that law. That law never existed before, but now that its been emptied out, and you don't know who might come back, that's a damn good way to keep black people out, isn't it? Because if you're 95% white to begin with, and you pass an ordinance that says that; I mean you can't say "No blacks need apply," you can't say "No blacks allowed," but that was an ingenious way to get around the law. Now, they got caught. There was a lawsuit threat, and they got rid of the ordinance. Now, my point of bringing it up is to say, once again, divide and conquer is working. These white folks in Chalmette need to march across that canal and join hands with the black folks more than willing to work with them for an awful long time and march on Baton Rouge and march on Washington D.C., and march on the core engineers and recognize their commonality of interests. But the whiteness, and the lure of whiteness, has tricked these have-nothing-in-their-bank-account white people into believing that they have more in common with the rich white folks on St. Charles Avenue that didn't lose anything in that flooding than they have in common with the black working class folks who live about 500 yards away.

## PRIVILEGE & PATHOLOGY

**WISE:** That's what white privilege does to white folks. But that's not all. It also creates an intense anxiety, like a mental dysfunction, an emotional anxiety, and distress. If you are privileged after all, if you are the top dog, if you have all the advantage, you are constantly afraid of who's gaining on you. You're constantly afraid of who's coming to take what you have. You've got to close the border. They're coming to take our stuff. We've got to worry about terrorists. They're coming to take our stuff. We got to get them before they get us; preventative war. We've got to stop them. That's what privilege will do for you because those who have it are constantly anxious. A study in June of 2004, in the journal of the American Medical Association, which received very little attention, found that in the United States the rates of anxiety disorder, depression, and substance abuse related mental disorders are twice the global average, five times the rate in Nigeria. How is it that the most powerful and privileged people on earth can have so much more anxiety than people who live in war torn areas, civil war, political corruption, amazing problems, often famine, all kinds of hardships, that for the most part, we don't see at least in the same abundance, let's say, in the United States? And yet, it is here that the greatest level of anxiety exists. I would suggest that the reason that happens is because it's the privilege that generates the anxiety. It's that constant fear of keeping up

and staying ahead, that generates the anxiety, the mentality of entitlement, the mentality that says, this is our world, and we get to make the rules in this world. And then we come to find out, not so much. We don't deal with set back very well, those that are the dominant group. And then when the real world intrudes on us, it's like a psychological come apart, like a meltdown. So when those people in Littleton, Colorado had their school shot up in Columbine, or when the folks in Santi, California, Santana High School, Springfield, Oregon, Thurston High School, all of those nice white spaces, which from the mid nineties to the early 2000s, it seemed like once or twice a year there was another one of these mass school shootings, and almost every single one of them, committed by a white male, of upper middle class background, in a place where everyone said, "This wasn't supposed to happen here." Because privilege allowed them to let down their guard to the dysfunction and pathology that they thought only existed over there. So we don't notice that Dillon Klebold and Eric Harris are building 35 bombs in the basement, because privilege means I don't even have to know what my kids are doing, I haven't even seen them in like a week. I'm taking classes at home depot.

No kids of color could have gotten away with that. 35 bombs, in what basement, A. B, if folks of color roll up to Ace Hardware looking for bomb supplies, they are not going to be sold them. But these white middle class folks drive up in nice cars looking to get some pipe bomb materials, some explosives, some real short fuses, and 'oh it's for a science fair experiment,' sure, here. Privilege. Usually it works out pretty well. 364 days out of the year, it goes ok. But if day 365 is April 20, 1999, and your kid goes to Columbine High School, you really don't care much about the other 364, because when you have that privilege of living in that bubble, and you don't have to think about what you don't have to think about. Remember, there might come a time where you have to think about it.

When 9/11 happened, notice the different ways that white folks and folks of color by the large reacted. Everybody was scared, everybody was angry, everybody was upset, everybody was freaking out. But now there were only some folks who went in front of the microphones, and said the following, and they were all white that I saw: Why do they hate us? Why? Why would anyone hate the United States of America? I don't get it. See, people of color, they didn't say this. It's not because folks of color hate this country, but because folks of color have historically a love/hate relationship with this society. Loving certain things about it, hating other things about it. But here's the more important point: To be a person of color in this country is to always have to know what the other guy thinks. It is to always have to know what other people think about you. Because if you don't, if you for one minute forget what other people might think about you, your life is in danger. But to be the dominant group is to have that luxury, or to think you do, of having to care what other people think. Because you're the big dog. You're the top. You're the king of the hill. You don't have to worry about what other people think. That's privilege. You don't have to know. You can just sort of laugh it off. Or at least we thought we could. We thought that we could have that attitude that says, "Well, what are you going to do about it? We're big and bad. We spend 400 billion dollars a year on

defense, fool. If you come for us, we will bomb you back to the Stone Age. And if you're already there, we'll take you back to whatever the hell came before the Stone Age. Because we can."

And then 19 guys with thirty seven dollars worth of box cutters, a thousand dollars worth of plane tickets, and a pissy attitude, pretty much said, "Ok, I'll tell you what. You spend your 400 billion dollars a year on defense. And here's the deal. Me and my boys are bringing these buildings down anyway. How do you like us now?" So privilege didn't allow us to see that the rest of the world doesn't view us the way we view us. Maybe we'd have been better off knowing that. Maybe we would have been better off for decades knowing that the rest of the world doesn't view us under the same liberatory terms that we sometimes view ourselves. Now people of color in this country already knew better, because when they asked white folks and black folks before the invasion of Iraq, good idea? Bad idea? The folks without privilege, said, "uh uh." Black folks were just like overwhelming, "nooooo." They asked white America said, "hell yes, we must do this! They are going to greet us like liberators!"

See, that's privilege speaking. Privilege says, surely they know we're liberated, surely they know. Rumsfeld said we are going to be greeted like liberators. Dick Cheney said it. They know so much about combat. Surely this will work out well! People of color, "Uh. No." Because folks of color know that even if you don't have very much, folks without much will kill you for the little bit they have. Well, you could invade Washington Heights tonight, but I don't recommend it. You could invade the South Bronx tonight, but I do not recommend it. Because the folks who are there, may well know they don't have much, but they will indeed kill you to keep what little they do have. And see, victims have long memories, and see, so the people we claim to be liberating don't forget, that their oppression came at the hands of a man that we supported all of these years they don't forget that. But those who create that victimization have short memories. We have the luxury of forgetting. So we go in, because privilege says it will work. Privilege says it will work, privilege says it will work. And then we come to find out maybe it doesn't work as well as we thought, and maybe we should have listened to the folks without privilege who know a little bit more about how oppressed people respond to invasion.

Invasion doesn't bring liberation, and black and brown folk know it. They've been there. They've done that. But the privilege had this luxury. I remember three days into the war, getting an e-mail from a guy who was angry at me for having written some anti-war essays, and 72 hours in he's writing me an email. 72 hours, see that's what kind of channel searching culture we are. Three days of war, and we're winning, so it's cool. "See, you dirty, stinky, no bath-taking Birkenstock wearing hippie, anarchist, communist! You were wrong!" I said, really? How do you know that we were wrong? Well, because look how it's going. We're winning. They love us. I said, really. How do you know that they love us? He said well, I opened the paper today and there was this great AP photograph right there on the front page of a little Iraqi kid giving the thumbs up to the soldiers, our soldiers, see, so they love us. They are greeting us like liberators. You all

are wrong. I said, okay, and I'll tell you, or I'll ask you, what I asked him. Again, a cultural competence quiz: What do you think this means in Iraq? Do you know what this means, throughout the so-called, Middle East, and much of North Africa, Egypt up? It does not mean keep up the good work. I love what you do. This instead is the functional equivalent of flipping you off. So this five-year-old child is punking our entire nation, but we don't know it because we don't have to know it, but maybe we should have known it. Because now, you see that five year old with the thumbs up and we say, "see, it's working. We have to do more of this." And though I am making light of this, I am doing so only because sometimes you have to laugh at the absurdity of this system, as not to cry.

There are thousands of parents in this country, and hundreds of thousands in Iraq, and in Afghanistan who are going to be burying, have already buried their children and are going to continue to bury their children this week and next week, and week after that, and the month after that, and the month after that. And to hear the politicians in this country tell it for years, that they are going to have to keep burying their kids because of this hubris, because of this privilege mentality of entitlement, that says the world is ours, to shape in our image, that we have the right to make it over and everyone else will bow before our superior firepower, and the rest of the world has, in case you have not noticed, pretty much called bullshit on that. So at some point, we better worry about privilege, not just cause of what it does to the ones without it, but because of what it does to us. What it turns us into. What it allows our policy makers to do in our name, which is not actually in our interests. We better understand that this is a system that is every bit as capable of hurting and killing us. We are not its first target. No, we are not its intended target. No, we are perhaps the collateral damage of this system – but damage nonetheless. And if we don't want that to continue, if we want to be free of that risk, that we ourselves are now placed in, we have to care about it not as an act of altruism or paternal concern, but as an act of self interest, and self liberation, and this is our job and this is our duty, irrespective of our guilt.

## **GUILT & RESPONSIBILITY**

**WISE:** See, it is very important, and I want to close with this before taking questions, I want you to know that this has nothing to do with guilt. I realize that none of the people in this room and none of the people in any of the rooms to which I speak every single week in this country somewhere are the ones who themselves, individually or even collectively, are responsible for the creation of this system of inequality, of privilege, of oppression, of marginalization. And that is not the point. I know we didn't create it, but we are here now, and we inherit the legacy of that which has come before. If you were to become the chief executor of a company one day, you would not be able to go in and call your chief financial officer on the phone and say, you know what, I want to look at the books I want to know how much we have, what our assets are what's our revenue stream. I want to know all that because I want to take us to new and greater heights and



so you ask the CFO to come in and give you the power point presentation, the spreadsheets, and she comes in with all of this technology and all of this data and gives you the presentation. Here's our assets, here's our revenue stream, here's our outstanding debt. What do you think? You wouldn't be able to look at that CFO and tell her, you know, I really liked your presentation. It was great to know we have all these assets and some really amazing income coming in, but the next time I ask you to come in and show me that, don't bring me the debt material, all that stuff about what we owe, because, see, I wasn't here when you all ran that up. That was that other guy. That was your last CEO. The debts of those older leaders, those are on them. Have them pay them. I am going to make use of the assets, oh yes. I am going to make use of the income, oh yes. But I am not going to pay the debts because they are not mine. You couldn't do that. You'd be ushered to your car by security. But that is exactly what we do as a society, isn't it? We say, the debts are not ours. Oh, the glory is ours. All the stuff we accumulated as a nation, as a people, that's ours. We don't mind living in the past as long as it glorifies us. That's what history books do. That is what July fourth is. We just don't want to own up to the part that is less flattering because we feel guilty. Because it isn't about guilt, it's about responsibility. Those two things are not synonymous. If we don't know the difference, we should look it up.

When we get tired of living in the funk, in the residue of that which has been given to us by others, with no regard for the impact and the damage that they would do to us and to our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, if and when we are lucky enough to have them. When we get tired of living in that residue, in that funk, and saying enough, then we'll get busy cleaning it, not because we created it, but because we are the only ones left to do the job. And if we don't, we'll be back or our children, grandchildren, and our great grandchildren will be back in rooms just like this one in generations to come. But I assure you, if they inherit this legacy, as we have inherited, the stakes will be far greater. The risk will be far greater. And the odds of success and victory at creating justice and opportunity for all will be far more remote. And so if we don't want to see that day come, it is up to us to get busy. It is up to us to take responsibility, not because we are guilty but because we are here. Thank you very much and take care.

[END]