



The Weekly Sift

making sense of the news one week at a time

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The Distress of the Privileged

In a [memorable scene](#) from the 1998 film *Pleasantville* (in which two 1998 teenagers are transported into the black-and-white world of a 1950s TV show), the father of the TV-perfect Parker family returns from work and says the magic words "Honey, I'm home!", expecting them to conjure up a smiling wife, adorable children, and dinner on the table.

This time, though, it doesn't work. No wife, no kids, no food. Confused, he repeats the invocation, as if he must have said it wrong. After searching the house, he wanders out into the rain and plaintively questions this strangely malfunctioning Universe: "Where's my dinner?"



Privileged distress. I'm not bringing this up just to discuss old movies. As the culture evolves, people who benefitted from the old ways invariably see themselves as victims of change. The world used to fit them like a glove, but it no longer does. Increasingly, they find themselves in unfamiliar situations that feel unfair or even unsafe. Their concerns used to take center stage, but now they must compete with the formerly invisible concerns of others.

If you are one of the newly-visible others, this all sounds whiny compared to the problems you face every day. It's tempting to blast through such privileged resistance with anger and insult.

Tempting, but also, I think, a mistake. The privileged are still privileged enough to foment a counter-revolution, if their frustrated sense of entitlement hardens.

So I think it's worthwhile to spend a minute or two looking at the world from George Parker's point of view: He's a good 1950s TV father. He never set out to be the bad guy. He never meant to stifle his wife's humanity or enforce a dull conformity on his kids. Nobody ever asked him whether the world *should* be black-and-white; it just was.

Historian Douglas Blackmon weighs in on the Confederate flag.

bit.ly/1KX3mM2 1 week ago

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George never *demand*ed a privileged role, he just uncritically accepted the role society assigned him and played it to the best of his ability. And now suddenly that society isn't working for the people he loves, and they're blaming him.

It seems so unfair. He doesn't want anybody to be unhappy. He just wants dinner.

Levels of distress. But even as we accept the reality of George's privileged-white-male distress, we need to hold on to the understanding that the less privileged citizens of Pleasantville are distressed in an entirely different way. (Margaret Atwood is supposed to have summed up the gender power-differential like this: "Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them.")

George deserves compassion, but his until-recently-ideal housewife Betty Parker (and the other characters assigned subservient roles) deserves *justice*. George and Betty's claims are not equivalent, and if we treat them the same way, we do Betty an injustice.

Tolerating Dan Cathy. Now let's look at a more recent case from real life.

One of the best things to come out of July's [Chick-fil-A brouhaha](#) was a series of posts on the Owdolatrous blog, in which a gay man (Wayne Self) did his best to wrangle the distress of the privileged.

The privileged in this case are represented by Chick-fil-A president Dan Cathy, who stirred up a hornet's nest when he denounced the "prideful, arrogant attitude" of those who support same-sex marriage, saying that they "are inviting God's judgment on our nation".

His comments drew attention to the millions that Chick-fil-A's founding family has contributed to anti-gay organizations, and led to calls for a boycott of their restaurants.

To which his defenders responded: Is tolerance a one-way street? Cathy was just expressing the genuine beliefs of his faith. As an American, he has freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Why can't gays and their supporters respect that?

"Nothing mutual about it." Self starts [his post](#) by acknowledging Cathy's distress, but refusing to accept it as equivalent to his own. Cathy is suffering because people are saying bad things about him and refusing to buy his sandwiches. Meanwhile, 29 states (including Self's home state of Louisiana) let employers fire gays for being gay. There are 75 countries Self and his partner can't safely visit, because homosexuality is illegal and (in some of them) punishable by death.

The Cathy family has [given \\$5 million](#) to organizations that work to maintain this state of oppression. Self comments:

This isn't about mutual tolerance because there's nothing mutual about it. If we agree to disagree on this issue, you walk away a full member of this society and I don't. There is no "live and let live" on this issue because Dan Cathy is spending millions to very specifically NOT let me live. I'm not trying to do that to him.

Christian push-back. That post got over a million page views and (at last count) 1595 comments, including some push-back from conservative Christians. [Self's follow-up](#) responded to one commenter who wrote that he supported Chick-fil-A as

[a] company with a founder who speaks for what seems to be the minority these days.

In other words, I specifically feel BASHED by the general media and liberal establishment and gay activists for simply being a Bible-believing Christian. From TV shows, movies, mainstream news and music, so

much is Intolerance of my conservative beliefs. I am labeled a HOMOPHOBIC and a HATER. ... I neither fear nor hate homosexuals.

Self brings in a [blog post by Bristol Palin](#), in which she scoffs at an interviewer's implication that she might refuse to have a gay partner on "Dancing With the Stars".

In their simplistic minds, the fact that I'm a Christian, that I believe in God's plan for marriage, means that I must hate gays and must hate to even be in their presence. Well, they were right about one thing: there was hate in that media room, but the hate was theirs, not mine.

... To the Left, "tolerance" means agreeing with them on, well, everything. To me, tolerance means learning to live and work with each other when we don't agree – and won't ever agree.

Like Bristol Palin, Self's commenter sees himself as the victim of bigotry. He isn't aware of hating anybody. He just wants to preserve the world he grew up in, and can't be bothered to picture how others suffer in that world.

He wants dinner.

Aesop II. Self answers with a story: a sequel to the Aesop fable of the mouse who saves a lion.

[A story is] the only way I know to address some of these things without resorting to words that hurt or offend, or shut down discussion.

Aesop's tale ends with the mouse and the lion as friends, but Self notes that they are still not equal: The Lion is King of the Jungle and the Mouse ... is a mouse.

In Self's sequel, the Lion hosts the Kingdom Ball, to which mice are never invited, because they disgust many of the larger animals. Nothing personal, the Lion explains to his friend, it's just the way things are.



At this point, Self breaks out of the story to explain why (in spite of the fact that his commenter feels "BASHED by the general media and liberal establishment") he is casting conservative Christians as the Lion and gays as the Mouse: It is not illegal to be a Christian in any state. You can't be fired for Christianity. Christians may feel bashed by criticism, but gays get literally bashed by hate crimes. Christians may feel like people are trying to silence them, but the Tennessee legislature debated a bill [making it illegal to say the word gay in public schools](#). (The senate [passed it](#).)

There is a vast difference between being told you're superstitious or old-fashioned and being told you're an abomination that doesn't deserve to live. There's a vast difference between being told you're acting hateful and being told God hates you.

I've been gay and Christian all my life. Trust me: Christian is easier. It's not even close.

Leonine distress. But does the Lion have reason to be annoyed with the Mouse? Of course. The Mouse is making trouble by asking to go where he's not wanted. The Mouse is "prideful" for expecting the rules to change to suit him. However, Self admits that the Lion probably doesn't hate or fear the Mouse.

I don't think you hate me. I certainly don't think you're afraid of me. Neither is Bristol Palin. She probably even has LGBT people she calls friends. She just disagrees with them about whether they should be invited to the party (the party, in this case, being marriage).

But here's the problem: **the basis of that disagreement is her belief that her relationships are intrinsically better than ours.**

There's a word for this type of statement: supremacist.

Ah, now we get to "words that hurt or offend". Here's what he means by it:

Supremacy is the habit of believing or acting as if your life, your love, your culture, your self has more intrinsic worth than those of people who differ from you.

Self sees a supremacist attitude in the commenter's

sense of comfort with yourself as an appropriate judge of my choices, ideas, or behaviors, ... unwillingness to appreciate the inherent inequality in a debate where I have to ask you for equality ... [and] unwillingness to acknowledge the stake that you have in your feeling of superiority rather than blame it on God.

[The third point is one that is not made often enough: A lot of interpretation and selective reading is required to find "God's plan for marriage" in the Bible. Did that doctrine arise on its own merits, or because it rationalizes heterosexual supremacy? [Elsewhere](#), I made a similar point about right-wing Protestants' adoption of the bizarre Catholic ensoulment-at-conception doctrine: Anti-abortion politics came first, and theology changed to rationalize it.]

Now let's finish the fable: Uninvited, the Mouse crashes the party. The shocked guests go silent, the Lion is furious, and the ensuing argument leads to violence: The Lion chucks the Mouse out the window, ending both the party and the friendship.

The lesson: Supremacy itself isn't hate. You may even have affection for the person you feel superior to. But supremacy contains the seeds of hate.

Supremacy turns to hate when the feeling of innate superiority is openly challenged. ... Supremacy is why you and Bristol Palin have more outrage at your own inconvenience than at the legitimate oppression of others.

We can talk about the subjugation of women later, honey. Where's my dinner?

George Parker's choices. All his life, George has tried to be a good guy by the lights of his society. But society has changed and he hasn't, so he isn't seen as a good guy any more. He feels terrible about that, but what can he do?

One possibility: Maybe he could learn to be a good guy by the lights of this new society. It would be hard. He'd have to give up some of his privileges. He'd have to examine his habits to see which ones embody assumptions of supremacy. He'd have to learn how to see the world through the eyes of others, rather than just assume that they will play their designated social roles. Early on, he would probably make a lot of mistakes and his former inferiors would correct him. It would be embarrassing.

But there is an alternative: counter-revolution. George could decide that his habits, his expectations, and the society they fit are RIGHT, 

and this new society is WRONG. If he joined with the other fathers (and right-thinking mothers like the one in [the poster](#)) of Pleasantville, maybe they could force everyone else back into their traditional roles.

Which choice he makes will depend largely on the other characters. If they aren't firm in their convictions, the counter-revolution may seem easy. ("There, there, honey. I know you're upset. But be reasonable.") But if their resentment is implacable, becoming a good guy in the new world may seem impossible.

Only the middle path — firmness together with understanding — has a chance to tame George and bring him back into society on new terms.

Privileged distress today. Once you grasp the concept of privileged distress, you'll see it everywhere: the rich feel "[punished](#)" by taxes; whites believe they are [the real victims of racism](#); employers' [religious freedom is threatened](#) when they can't deny contraception to their employees; [English-speakers resent bilingualism](#) — it goes on and on.

And what is the Tea Party movement other than a counter-revolution? It comes cloaked in religion and fiscal responsibility, but scratch the surface and you'll find privileged distress: Change has taken something from us and we want it back.

Confronting this distress is tricky, because neither acceptance nor rejection is quite right. The distress is usually very real, so rejecting it outright just marks you as closed-minded and unsympathetic. It never works to ask others for empathy without offering it back to them.

At the same time, my straight-white-male sunburn can't be allowed to compete on equal terms with your heart attack. To me, it may seem fair to flip a coin for the first available ambulance, but it really isn't. Don't try to tell me my burn doesn't hurt, but don't consent to the coin-flip.

The Owdolatrous approach — acknowledging the distress while continuing to point out the difference in scale — is as good as I've seen. Ultimately, the privileged need to be won over. Their sense of justice needs to be engaged rather than beaten down. The ones who still want to be good people need to be offered hope that such an outcome is possible in this new world.

Update: I've written a number of other things about privilege since this post first appeared, some here, and some on my religious blog [Free and Responsible Search](#).

- "[The Web of Privilege](#)" is a talk I gave to a men's group in Ann Arbor. It reviews some of the material presented above, and then tries to move beyond the privileged/oppressed dichotomy to deal with the notion that we are almost all privileged in some ways while oppressed in others. The "web" metaphor is intended to replace the metaphor of privilege as a wall.

- ["Recovery From Privilege"](#) responds to the frequent response (typified by a comment on this post) that the whole point of talking about privilege is to make people feel guilty. Guilt actually isn't the response I'm looking for, because it's a dead-end state that does no one any good. Instead, I outline a recovery process.
- ["Privilege and the Bubble of Flattery"](#) is my response to the Princeton freshman whose essay in *Time* says he'll never apologize for his privilege, as if that's what anyone wanted.

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By [weeklysift](#), on September 10, 2012 at 9:47 am, under [Articles](#). Tags: [culture wars](#), [religion](#).

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Very nice examination! Thanks for using my post. I look forward to reading more from you!

bengali On September 25, 2012 at 8:04 am

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The author got at least one fact wrong. People in fact can, and have been, fired for being Christians.

not willing to provide it On September 26, 2012 at 10:20 pm

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They have also been fired for NOT being Christians. I don't think worshipping a Godsicle is a good thing anyhow. If you look at those who call themselves 'Christians' and the preachings of Christ, mostly by actually reading the Bible, you will see that the two are diametrically opposed. By the way, what do you call a guy who hangs out with his twelve drinking buddies, and none of them actually ever dates a woman, even when the women throw themselves at the guy? Doesn't that sound like a gay man to you? Well, guess what. That also sounds like Jesus, doesn't it?

