



## CHAPTER 8

## Getting Off the Hook: Denial and Resistance

No one likes to see themselves as connected to someone else's misery, no matter how remote the link. Usually their first response is to find a way to get themselves off the hook, and, as I'll show below, there are all kinds of ways to do that. As a result, they leave it to someone else to take care of the problem, which, of course, doesn't happen, and for pretty much the same reasons.

The fact is that we're all on the hook because there's no way to avoid being part of the problem. People in subordinate groups are on the hook every day. Dominant groups are, too, but they're more likely not to know it because they have so many ways to act as though they aren't, and privilege usually allows them to get away with it. But the more aware we are of all the ways there are to fool ourselves, the easier it is to wake up and make ourselves part of the solution.<sup>1</sup>

### DENY AND MINIMIZE

Perhaps the easiest way to get off the hook is to deny that it exists in the first place.

"Racism and sexism used to be problems, but they aren't anymore."

"The American Dream is alive and well and available to everyone."

"There are no people with disabilities where I work, so that isn't an issue here."

"Affirmative action has actually turned the tables—if anyone's in trouble now, it's whites and men." Or, as a cover of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine proclaimed, "Girls Rule!"<sup>2</sup>

Closely related to denial is the minimization of the trouble by acknowledging that it exists but then claiming that it doesn't amount to much. When women and people of color are accused of "whining," for example, they're essentially being told that whatever they have to deal with isn't that bad and they should "just get on with it." When you deny the reality of oppression, you also deny the reality of the privilege that underlies it, which is just what it takes to get off the hook.

When people in dominant groups practice this kind of denial, it rarely seems to occur to them that they're in a poor position to know what they're talking about. For them to act as though they know better than others do about what they are up against is just the sort of presumption that privilege encourages. Privilege invites them to define other people's experience for them, to tell them what it's like to be them regardless of what they say it's like. Adults do this all the time with children. A child falls down and cries and an adult might say, "Now, now, stop crying, it doesn't hurt that much," when in fact the adult doesn't know just how much it hurts. Or the child wakes up with a nightmare and adults might tell them, "There's nothing to be afraid of," when that may not be true at all for the child. In similar ways, members of privileged groups are culturally authorized to interpret other people's experience for them, to deny the validity of their own reports, and to impose their views of reality.

Denial also takes the form of seeing subordinate groups as actually being *better off* than privileged groups. I once knew a woman, for example, who often remarked with a sense of envy on the qualities black people have had to develop to survive in the face of centuries of racism. She sees in them a strength and depth of soul and feeling that she'd like to have herself. Whenever the subject of racism comes up, her first response is to counter with a list of black "advantages," as if weighing them in the balance against her privileged position as a white woman. Her tone is a mixture of longing and resentment, as

if she feels put upon to have to consider white privilege for even a moment when she feels such a lack in her own life. The paradoxical idea that envy and privilege can and often do exist side by side doesn't occur to her as she defends herself against seeing what she'd rather not see.

As Stanley Cohen argues in his book, *States of Denial*, when it becomes impossible to avoid seeing the reality of privilege and oppression, additional levels of denial come into play—not feeling anything about it or feeling something but not seeing it as a moral issue or, if all else fails, denying there's anything we can do.<sup>3</sup>

### BLAME THE VICTIM

One can acknowledge that terrible things happen to people and still get off the hook by blaming it all on them.<sup>4</sup> Whites can draw on a rich supply of negative cultural stereotypes, for example, to satisfy themselves that if people of color were different—if they were more like whites supposedly are—they wouldn't have so much trouble. Whites can say things such as “If blacks were smarter or worked harder or got an education, they'd be okay” and expect most other whites to go along, because racist stereotypes have such authority in this culture. They can also count on whites who disagree with them not to say so to their face.

In similar ways, men can tell themselves that women who say they're sexually harassed are hypersensitive, or had no business being where they were, or sent mixed signals, or “asked for it” in one way or another. If a woman fails to break through the glass ceiling, men can say she doesn't have the right stuff. If she allows herself to be openly emotional, men can point to that as a reason she hasn't reached the heights. If she *isn't* emotional and nurturing, they can criticize her for not being “womanly” enough, too much like a man. If she's friendly, men can say she wants to be approached sexually. If she isn't friendly, they can say she's stuck up, cold, a bitch even, and deserves whatever she gets.

Or people with disabilities are told that the reason they can't get on the bus or climb the steps to enter the building is that they use a wheelchair, or that the reason they can't vote is that they can't see the

ballot. In other words, it is assumed that the limits on what they can do are caused solely by the condition of their bodies and not *also* by the narrow assumptions made by nondisabled people when they design buildings and buses and the rest of the physical environment. In a society where nondisability is privileged and defined by the dominant group, what is then viewed as “disability” is routinely assumed to be something that resides solely in the person who has it, thereby making it their problem, if not their fault.

The result of such thinking is that oppression is blamed on the people who suffer most from it, while privilege and those who benefit remain invisible and relatively untouched. And off the hook.

### CALL IT SOMETHING ELSE

A more subtle way to deny oppression and privilege is to call them something else, thereby creating the appearance of being in touch with reality without having to do something about it.

Gender inequality, for example, is often described as a charming “battle of the sexes,” or as an anthropological curiosity based on the idea that males and females come from different cultures, if not different planets. Deborah Tannen tells us in her popular books on gender and language that the problem is primarily one of communication and misunderstanding. The two genders come from essentially different cultures, she writes, and they get into trouble because they don't know how to interpret each other's talk. In fact, however, they grow up in the same families, attend the same schools, watch television and movies together, and play in the same neighborhoods and schoolyards.

And while gender differences in styles of talk do exist, they are more significant than the differences between, say, Japanese and U.S. styles of talk. The differences are more significant because they serve the purpose of ensuring male privilege and keeping women in an inferior position by reflecting the male-dominated, male-centered, male-identified nature of society. Every time a man interrupts a woman, for example, and she defers by keeping silent, a pattern of male dominance and male centeredness is acted out once again, one of the endless tiny events through which social systems and gender privilege

happen. There's nothing cute or charming about it, but acting as if there were is a way to avoid looking at what's really going on.

Avoiding the trouble by renaming it is most prevalent in matters of gender inequality. A major reason is that women and men depend on one another in ways that other groups do not. Most whites don't particularly need people of color, for example, but relationships across gender lines are the backbone of most people's lives. This is especially true for heterosexuals, but no matter what your sexual orientation, everyone has parents, and most people have siblings or friendships that are cross-gender. So, how do we live in such close quarters without confronting the reality—and the discomfort—of the trouble surrounding male privilege? Patriarchal culture provides the answer: to see the world through a thick ideology of images and ideas that mask the reality of gender inequality by turning it into something else in our minds.

Men can find ways to make jokes, for example, about every aspect of gender inequality, from violence against women to sexuality to who gets stuck with cleaning the house or changing the diapers. They can laugh about it in ways that would be unthinkable if the subject were race or anti-Semitism. This isn't because gender oppression is less serious than other forms. In many ways just the opposite is true. Instead, it is because gender inequality runs so deep in our lives and has such serious consequences that we must go to great lengths to make it appear normal and so avoid seeing it for what it is.

### IT'S BETTER THIS WAY

The combination of denial and calling privilege and oppression something else often results in the claim that everyone actually prefers things the way they are. Whites, for example, may claim that blacks would rather live among other blacks, reflecting a supposedly natural human tendency to choose the company of "your own kind." In fact, however, research shows clearly that most blacks would prefer to live in integrated neighborhoods. If anyone wants to live "with their own kind," it is whites, who do so by enforcing an extreme level of residential segregation in the United States.

Segregation is also portrayed as a matter of simple economics, that people of color don't live among whites because they can't afford to.

But in fact, it is racism, not income, occupation, or education, that stands in the way of integrated living for most people of color, especially those in the middle class.<sup>5</sup>

The thick ideology that surrounds gender privilege includes all kinds of claims that the status quo is best. Patriarchal culture, for example, is full of messages that women prefer strong men who dominate them and make all the "big" decisions. When a woman says no to sex, she at least means maybe and probably means yes. Women "ask" for all kinds of trouble, especially what's otherwise known as rape, sexual harassment, and being beaten by domestic partners. Male superiority is a natural arrangement dictated by genes and other biological imperatives. Men are naturally breadwinners, and women are naturally suited to having bread won for them and tending to children and keeping the house clean. It doesn't matter how much evidence is weighed against such notions. It doesn't matter how often women complain about male control or how often they insist that no means no. It doesn't matter that women have been major "breadwinners" for virtually all of human history and that staying home and being supported by men is an historical anomaly that doesn't apply to the vast majority of people in the world and never has.

The truth doesn't matter because ideology isn't about truth or accuracy. Rather, its purpose is to support and perpetuate the status quo by making it appear normal and legitimate. In this case, the status quo is privilege, and ideology supports it by getting privileged people off the hook. It supports the all too human tendency to soothe yourself into thinking there's nothing unpleasant or challenging here to deal with, and certainly nothing to do with you. And when someone dares to challenge that comforting reality, it's easy to confuse the bearer of bad news with the bad news itself. When people of color call attention to the divisions caused by white privilege, for example, they're often accused of *creating* those divisions, as if racism isn't a problem unless you talk about it. Talking about privilege rather than privilege itself gets defined as the problem.

Being part of the solution to a trouble that already divides us begins with coming together around the simple truth that we're *all* in trouble and that pretending we aren't only keeps us apart.

## IT DOESN'T COUNT IF YOU DON'T MEAN IT

Because U.S. culture encourages us to use an individual-guilt model to explain just about everything that goes wrong, it's easy to confuse intentions with consequences. In other words, if something bad happens, someone's conscious bad intentions must be behind it. A corollary is that if your intentions are good, they cannot result in something bad.

As we saw earlier, for example, white racism is usually defined as a bad attitude toward people of color, as malicious intentions buttressed by negative cultural stereotypes. When whites are confronted with matters of race, they usually react as if the issue isn't patterns of inequality and unnecessary suffering but their own personal feelings and views about race and the question of their individual guilt or innocence. They respond as if the challenge is to get themselves off the hook by showing themselves to be pure on the subject of race. They seem to think that if they don't *mean* it, then it didn't happen, as if their conscious intent is the only thing that connects them to the consequences of what they do or don't do.

"I didn't mean it" can stop a conversation before people get to the reality that it doesn't matter whether it was meant or not. The consequence remains the same. Take the case of a white female professor who calls on only whites in class. Since she has no conscious animosity toward people of color, she doesn't see herself as having anything to do with the continuing pattern of racial inequality that results from the choices she makes as she does her job. In other words, she doesn't see herself as part of the problem or, therefore, as part of the solution.

Or a man makes repeated sexual comments to a female colleague. When she gets angry and tells him to stop, he gets defensive. He says it was only a joke, or that he just finds her attractive and meant no harm by it. What he doesn't do is acknowledge that regardless of the intentions he's aware of, he *has* done her harm, and she's likely to be left to deal with it on her own. He acts as though a lack of conscious intent means a lack of effect, as if *saying* it was only a joke or only being *aware* of it as a joke is enough to *make* it just a joke.

Sometimes this insight can take us into unexpected places when we apply it to the mundane details of everyday life. A while ago, for

example, a middle-aged man at a talk I gave expressed frustration and concern about whether to open doors for women. "The rules are changing," he said. "I always thought it was the polite thing to do, but now women get mad at me sometimes."

This incident reminded me of an online discussion that began when a woman pointed out that she didn't like it when men rushed ahead to open a door for her to pass through without having to open it herself. "I remember," she wrote, "when I first realized how stupid I felt sitting in a car while a man scurried around to open the door for me." She objected to this "door-opening ceremony" because "it seemed to do more for men than it did for women." She explained that it puts men in a position of control and independence (men can open doors for themselves) and leaves her waiting helplessly for men to do what she could do for herself. Like all rituals, opening doors is symbolic, and it conveys a cultural message that men are active, capable, and independent, whereas women are passive, incapable, and dependent—yet another way to keep men in control.

The men roared back in a defensive chorus. "We aren't *trying* to dominate anyone," wrote one. "We're just being *polite*."

"But," another woman objected, "there's more going on than the men admit." She pointed out that if this ritual were just performed out of politeness, *women* would also feel obliged to open doors for *men*, since being polite is something that runs both ways. Politeness, of course, can go in just one direction, as when subordinates defer to superiors.

"Well, maybe that's what door opening is," a man shot back. "Men are like servants waiting on women."

"But," came the reply, "if that were so, why is it so hard to get men to help us when we really need it? Why are we always stuck with the scut work at home and at work?"

It went on this way for quite a while, women objecting to *consequences* they didn't like and men defending against conscious *intentions* they didn't feel they had. The key to getting unstuck, I think, is to realize that consequences matter whether or not they're matched by intentions. "The road to Hell," as the old saying goes, "is paved with good intentions." When men defend opening doors for women as just being polite, they assume it can't mean something they don't know about.

But what things mean isn't a private matter, because meaning comes from culture. Men can *think* they're just being nice guys, but that doesn't mean rushing ahead to open that door won't have social consequences beyond what they're aware of. In a patriarchal society, there's a good chance that the forms people follow—including being "polite"—are also patriarchal. In short, both sides of the argument can be right: men may not consciously intend to put women down, and what men do often *does* put women down.

It's also worth noting that I didn't get the sense that the women in this conversation were trying to get the men to confess to some evil motive. They weren't trying to make them feel bad about themselves or even apologize. What they wanted was for men to be conscious of what they were doing, to see how such patterns can produce bad consequences, and to do something to stop it.

Toward that end, it is generally useful to ask ourselves what we mean whenever we say, "I didn't mean it," because on some level, it's reasonable to assume that we mean everything we do and say. At a retirement party for a black manager, for example, a white colleague arranged a slide show that included pictures of black people happily eating watermelon, an image with a long history of being used to stereotype blacks as lazy and not smart enough to care about anything more complex than having something sweet to eat. Blacks in the audience were shocked and angered, and when someone confronted the white man later on, his reaction was, "I'm not racist. I didn't mean anything by it."

In effect, "I didn't mean it" often comes close to "I didn't say it" or "I didn't do it," which of course isn't true. What, then, do the words signify? Most of the time, the real message is "I did it, I said it, but I didn't think about it." In many social situations, that kind of response clearly won't work. If I steal someone's car, the judge is unlikely to go easy on me if I say, "I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted the car and I didn't think much about it at the time." Or, "I didn't consider whether the owner would mind" or "Getting arrested didn't cross my mind." The judge would probably say, "You *should* have thought about it." In other words, I'm held responsible to act with an ongoing awareness of the consequences of what I do and don't do.

But privilege works against such awareness in all kinds of social situations. The manager should have been mindful of racial patterns in mentoring and promotion. The white colleague should have thought about the cultural message behind demeaning stereotypes that associate blacks with watermelon. The man who sexually harassed should have been aware of what it's like to be a woman on the receiving end of such behavior. But they weren't, and such patterns are the norm, not the exception. Why?

If we use an individualistic model of the world, the answer is that people are callous or uncaring or prejudiced or too busy to bother with paying attention to their actions—especially if they're white or heterosexual or male. Sometimes, of course, this is true, but more often the larger truth is that the luxury of obliviousness makes a lack of conscious intent a path of least resistance that's easy to follow without knowing it. The sense of entitlement and superiority that underlies most forms of privilege runs so deep and is so entrenched that people don't have to think about it in order to act from it. They can always say they didn't mean it and, in a real sense, they're telling the truth. That's why "I didn't mean it" can be so disarming and such an effective way to defend privilege. They *weren't* thinking, they *weren't* mindful, they *weren't* aware—all the things that go into "meaning it." But this is precisely the problem with privilege and the damage that it does.

### I'M ONE OF THE GOOD ONES

One way to acknowledge the problem of privilege and oppression and get off the hook at the same time is to make use of an illusion we looked at earlier—that bad things happen in social life simply because of bad people. Since I can make a good case that I'm not a bad person, then the trouble couldn't have anything to do with me.

"Racism still exists," I can say, "and it's a shame there are still bigots around like the Klan and skinheads and neo-Nazis." Or, "Unfortunately, some men still haven't gotten used to women in the workplace." Or, "People who haven't worked through their homophobia make life difficult for gays and lesbians."

"And," I can hasten to add, if only to myself, "I don't belong to the Klan, I don't see color, I like women, and I have no 'problem' with gays and lesbians as far as I know, and I never park in those hand-capped spaces."

Having set myself up as a good person with good intentions, I can feel disapproval or even compassion for all those bad, flawed, or sick people who supposedly make trouble happen all by themselves in spite of people like me. And I can sympathize with people who suffer as a result. But the issue of just where *I* am in all of this drops out of sight. Apparently I'm on the outside looking in as a concerned observer. I might even have moments when I count myself as a victim, since I feel bad whenever I think about it.

But the truth is that my silence, my inaction, and especially my passive acceptance of the everyday privilege that goes along with group membership are all it takes to make me just as much a part of the problem as any member of the Klan.

It's a point that's easy to miss, because we want people to see and judge us as individuals, not as members of a social category.<sup>6</sup> But when we insist on that, we're being naïve if not somewhat false, for the fact is that we *do* want people to treat us as members of social categories whenever it works to our advantage. When I go into a store, for example, I want to be waited on right away and treated with respect even though the clerks don't know a thing about me as an individual. I want them to accept my check or credit card and not treat me with suspicion and distrust. But all they know about me is the categories they think I belong to—a customer of a certain race, age, gender, disability status, and class—and all the things they think they know about people who belong to those categories. I want that to be enough. I don't want to have to prove over and over again that I'm someone who deserves to be trusted and taken seriously. I want them to *assume* all that, and the only way they can do that is to perceive me as belonging to the "right" social categories.

This is simply how social life works. By itself, it's not a problem. What many people resist seeing, however, is that on the other side of that same social process are all the people who get put into the "wrong" categories and ignored or followed around or treated with suspicion and disrespect regardless of who they are as individuals.

I can't have it both ways. If I'm going to welcome the way social categories work to my advantage, I also have to consider that when those same categories are used against others through no fault of their own, it then becomes *my* business because through that process *I* am being privileged at *their* expense.

In 1990, ABC News aired as a segment of *Prime Time* a documentary called *True Colors* that powerfully illustrates this dynamic. It focused on two men who were quite similar in every observable characteristic except race: one was black and one was white. The crew used hidden cameras and microphones to record what happened in various situations—applying for a job, accidentally locking oneself out of the car, trying to rent an apartment, shopping for shoes, buying a car, and so on. Over and over again the two men were treated differently. In one instance, for example, the white man wandered into a shoe store in a shopping mall. He was barely across the threshold when the white clerk approached him with a smile and an outstretched hand. He looked at some shoes and then went on his way. Minutes later his black partner entered the store and from the outset was utterly ignored by the clerk, who stood only a few feet away. Nothing the black man did seemed to make a difference. He picked up and looked at shoes, he walked up and down the display aisles, he gazed thoughtfully at a particular style. After what seemed an eternity, he left.

When I show *True Colors* in my race class and at diversity training sessions, I ask whites if they identify with anyone in the video. Invariably they say no, because they don't see themselves in the black man's predicament or in the racist behavior of the whites. Somehow, the white partner who is on the receiving end of preferential treatment is invisible to them, and if I don't mention him, he rarely comes up. In other words, they don't say, "Yes, I see myself in the white guy receiving the benefits of white privilege."

The effect of this obliviousness is for *them* to become invisible as white people in everyday situations and unaware of how privilege happens to them, especially in relation to other whites. They don't see themselves as being involved in situations in which privilege comes into play. They don't see, for example, that simply being white puts them in a particular relationship with someone like the shoe store clerk (whom they readily identify as racist) or that this relationship

affects the way customers of color are treated and the way *they* are treated as whites.

The invisibility of whiteness illustrates how privilege can blind those who receive it to what's going on. As Ruth Frankenberg writes about a white woman she interviewed, "Beth was much more sharply aware of racial *oppression* shaping Black experience than of race *privilege* shaping her own life. Thus, Beth could be alert to the realities of economic discrimination against Black communities while still conceptualizing her own life as racially neutral—nonracialized, nonpolitical."<sup>7</sup>

A common form of blindness to privilege is that women and people of color are often described as being treated unequally, but men and whites are not. This, however, is logically impossible. *Unequal* simply means "not equal," which describes both those who receive less than their fair share *and* those who receive more. But there can't be a short end of the stick without a long end, because it's the longness of the long end that makes the short end short. To pretend otherwise makes privilege and those who receive it invisible.

So long as we participate in a society that transforms difference into privilege, there is no neutral ground on which to stand. If I'm in a meeting in which men pay more attention to what I and other men say than they do to women, for example, I'm on the receiving end of privilege. My mere acceptance of that privilege—whether conscious or not—is all that other men need from me to perpetuate it. Other men *need* my compliance for male privilege to work, even if my compliance is unconscious and passive. I know this because as soon as I resist that path by speaking out and merely calling attention to it, I can feel the defensive response rise up to meet me. In this sense, I don't have to be consciously hostile toward women in order to play an integral role in maintaining male privilege as a pattern in this society.

In the same way, for white privilege to work, whites need the compliance of other whites. If I look around my workplace and see no people of color, my silence on this issue sends the message to other whites that there *is* no issue. The shoe clerk's racist behavior depends on his being able to assume that other whites don't see a problem with preferential treatment for whites. That's what makes this path of racial preference a path of least resistance. And every white person either

supports or challenges that assumption in choosing which path to follow. It is in the nature of social life that people continually look to one another to confirm or deny what they experience as reality. Given that, other people will interpret my going along with them down this path as my acceptance of that path unless I do something to make them think otherwise. Whether we know it or not, when someone discriminates by treating me better simply because I'm white, we walk down a path of white privilege *together*.

There is no such thing as doing nothing. There is no such thing as being neutral or uninvolved. At every moment, social life involves all of us.

## SICK AND TIRED

It's not unusual for whites to comment on how sick and tired they are of hearing about race. "It's always in your face," they say. I ask how often is "always," and what does "it" consist of? They become a bit vague. "Oh, it's in the news," they say, "all the time."

"Every day?" I ask.

"Well, it seems like it," they say.

"Every hour, every minute?"

"No, of course not," they say, and I can tell they're starting to get a little irritated with me. I realize they aren't trying to report an objective reality in the world. They're describing the feeling of being annoyed by something, put upon. When you're annoyed by something, it can seem as though it's everywhere, as if there's no escaping it. When it comes to the problem of privilege and oppression, privileged groups don't want to hear about it at *all* because it disturbs the luxury of obliviousness that comes with privilege. This means you don't have to bring it up often for them to feel put upon. "Always" turns out to be somewhere between never and every minute. In reality, "all the time" comes down to "enough to make me look at what I don't want to look at, enough to make me uncomfortable." And usually that doesn't take much.

A similar dynamic operates with most forms of privilege. The middle and upper classes say they're sick and tired of hearing about welfare and poverty. Nondisabled people are sick and tired of hearing

about disability issues. And it takes almost no criticism at all for members of dominant groups to feel “bashed,” as if it’s “open season on us.” In fact, just saying something like “male privilege” or “patriarchy” can start eyes rolling and evoke that exasperated sense of “Here we go *again*.”

In fact, however, there is almost always utter silence in this society on the subject of male privilege. In a system that privileges maleness, the default is *never* to do anything that might make *men* feel challenged or uncomfortable as men. In the same way, because whiteness is privileged over color, the norm is to never call attention to whiteness itself in ways that make white people uncomfortable. It’s expected, of course, to routinely draw attention to male and white and nondisabled and heterosexual *people*, since our society is centered on and identified with those groups. But that differs from drawing attention to “male,” “heterosexual,” “nondisabled,” or “white” as social categories that are problematic.

Another reason for the “sick and tired” complaint is that life is hard for everyone. “Don’t bring us your troubles,” privileged groups say to the rest, “we’ve got troubles of our own.” Many white men, for example, especially those who lack class privilege, spend a lot of time worrying about losing their jobs. So, why should they have to listen to women or people of color talk about problems with work, especially when the talk suggests that white men should be doing something more than they already are? When Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund, says that it’s “utterly exhausting being Black in America,” many white people barely miss a beat in responding that they’re tired, too.<sup>8</sup>

And of course, they are. They’re exhausted from the pace of life that a competitive capitalist society imposes on everyone, and it’s hard to hear about privilege and oppression. But it’s one thing to have to hear about such problems and another to have to live them every day. The quick white defensiveness runs right past the fact that whatever it is that exhausts white people, it isn’t the fact of being white. It may be exhausting to be a parent or a worker or a spouse or a student who works all day and studies all night, but it’s not exhausting to be a white person or, for that matter, a heterosexual or a man.

By comparison, people in subordinate groups have to do all the things that also exhaust members of dominant groups, from raising families to earning a living to getting older. But on top of that, they must also struggle with the accumulation of fine grinding grit that oppression loads onto people’s lives simply because they’re in the “wrong” social category.

“I’m sick and tired” is a defense that allows privileged groups to claim the protected status of victims. It reminds me of those times when people injure you in some way, and when you confront them about it, they get angry at *you* because you’ve made them feel guilty about what they did. “Look how bad you’ve made me feel,” they say, as if you’re supposed to apologize for bringing your injury to their attention. Children often use this defense because they’re so self-centered that the idea of taking responsibility for what they’ve done doesn’t occur to them. When confronted with their misbehavior they may sulk and glower and act hurt and put upon, as if someone has just laid a heavy and undeserved weight on their shoulders.

Privilege similarly encourages people to be self-centered and unaccountable to others. It encourages whites and men and other advantaged groups to behave as less than adults. It makes avoiding responsibility for what they do and don’t do a path of least resistance. And yet, at the same time, these are the groups in charge of social institutions. People in these groups are the ones who occupy positions of responsible adult authority. It’s a combination guaranteed to keep privilege and oppression going unless the cycle of denial and defense is broken. The challenge for dominant groups is to see how privilege keeps them from growing up, how it diminishes everyone—including them—and blocks their potential to be part of the solution.

### GETTING OFF THE HOOK BY GETTING ON

If being on the hook for privilege and oppression means being perpetually vulnerable to guilt and blame, then we shouldn’t be surprised that people do whatever they can to get off it. But according to my dictionary, *on the hook* also means being “committed,” “obliged,” and “involved.”

In this sense, being on the hook is one of those things that distinguish adults from children—adults are and children aren't. When I'm on the hook, I feel called on to use my power and authority as an adult to take responsibility, to act, to make things happen. Being "involved" makes me part of something larger, and I can't stand alone as an isolated individual. Being "obliged" means more than just being burdened, because it also connects me to people and makes me aware of how I affect them. And being "committed" to something focuses my potential to make a difference and bonds me to those who feel the same way.

Off the hook, I'm like a piece of wood floating with the current. On the hook, I have forward motion and a rudder to steer by. Off the hook, I live in illusion and denial, as if I can choose whether to be involved in the life of our society and the consequences it produces. But involvement is something that comes with being alive in the world as a human being. On the hook is where I can live fully in the world as it really is.

Trying to live off the hook puts members of privileged groups inside a tight little circle that cuts them off from much of what it means to be alive. They have to work to distance themselves from most of humanity, because they can't get close to other people without touching the trouble that surrounds privilege and oppression. Men living off the hook distance and insulate themselves from women, whites from people of color, heterosexuals from lesbians and gay men, the nondisabled from those with disabilities, the middle and upper classes from the working and lower classes. And the more diverse and interconnected the world becomes, the harder it is to sustain the illusion and the denial day after day, the more it takes to maintain the distance and deny the connection. The result of illusion and denial is to become like the person who loses the ability to feel pain and risks bleeding to death from a thousand tiny cuts that go unnoticed, untreated, and unhealed.

Sooner or later, dominant groups must embrace this hook they're on, not as some terrible affliction or occasion for guilt and shame but as a challenge and an opportunity. It's where they've been, where they are, and where they're going.



## CHAPTER 9

### *What Can We Do?*

The challenge we face is to change patterns of exclusion, rejection, privilege, harassment, discrimination, and violence that are everywhere in this society and have existed for hundreds (or, in the case of gender, thousands) of years. We have to begin by thinking about the trouble and the challenge in new and more productive ways as outlined in the preceding chapters. Here is a summary of the tools we've identified so far.

Large numbers of people have sat on the sidelines and seen themselves as part of neither the problem nor the solution. Beyond this, however, they are far from homogeneous. Everyone is aware of people who intentionally act out in oppressive ways. But there is less attention given to the millions of people who know inequities exist and want to be part of the solution. Their silence and invisibility allow privilege and oppression to continue. Removing what silences them and stands in their way can tap an enormous potential of energy for change.

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

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