

Waking Up to Whiteness

Learning and Growing with the World Around Us

This is an article for mainly pakeha/white people about how the dominant white systems control the way our world works and how if you are white, you benefit from that without even trying. Be open to reflect on your layers of your privilege - even those you may not know you possess.

There are four parts to this article: Being Clueless, Waking Up, Understanding and Taking Action.

Being Clueless

I grew up in a loving family who had great family holidays - at the beach, at the mountain. We lived in a large house on a farm my family owned since before 1896. In the summer, I rode my horse to school for fun, not because I had to. I would leave the pony in our school horse paddock. There were six kids in my class. When I was 12, I went to a small boarding school. There were less than 20 girls in my class. I was allowed to repeat 6th form and gained all the credits I needed as if I had been in the 7th. My mother got me my first job and ensured I had access to university when I decided I wanted to go there.

Then, in 1980, I left for my great OE (overseas experience) and arrived in England via Australia with about 10 Aussie dollars in cash. The immigration officer asked how much money I had. I replied, (thinking, How rude!) "Enough!" I never realised that he was required to ask to ensure I had enough money to survive. When I got through immigration, I had arranged for my friend to come and collect me but on the day she was too busy working. I changed that 10 dollars to less than 5 UK pounds and discovered it was not enough to buy a train ticket into London. I burst into tears and asked a stranger who had been on the flight to give me some money. They did.

When I returned from my OE I decided it was time to get a "proper" job using my degree. The day before the interview on Thursday, I packed my bags and drove five hours to the city where the job was. They asked me if I got the job, when could I start? I told them tomorrow, fully expecting that they would want me. They took the weekend and I started on Monday.

When these kinds of experiences have happened all my life, I never doubted if I would survive. I never realised my privilege. I had no clue. What ignorance and utter belief I had in the world.



Waking Up

It has taken me a long time to wake up - to really wake up. As a young person, I knew there were people who were less well off, but I didn't really get that the system worked actively against those who were not part of the privileged few.

At my first professional job - yes the one I got - we had a wonderful colleague, Hana Tukukino, who opened my eyes. I attended the Social Work conference in 1986 at Turangawaewae, in Ngaruawahia. I remember talking in the whareniui really late at night or early

in the morning and crying having been challenged to move a lot faster. Maori had been waiting a long time to work in partnership, over 150 years! I was challenged by Hana to dry my tears as I had not been hurt by this system. My job was to work to do something about it.

During the late 90's, I had three children and I took my eye off the ball, politically speaking. But I was involved at Playcentre and I have to say, I had a lot more tears.

I am still opening my eyes, recognising and learning all the time. Like last month, I was telling a story in a workshop



about how I responded as a young person when my boss talked over me. Truly, I stood on a chair as I was frustrated by his behaviour, in the middle of our meeting (just him and me). Another time I took his phone off the hook and stood by the door and didn't let anyone in. It was white privilege that allowed me to do that with no consequence except getting what I wanted.

As I told that story in the workshop, I realised that not everyone would be able to do that and not have negative consequences come their way.

Understanding: What I Know Now

My privilege goes on, and I am part of maintaining this system. How, you might say? By being fragile, crying, by not knowing our history, by talking and not listening. Taking up space, hearing the anger and not the message. By thinking that I might know better. Those of us who would like to call ourselves allies unconsciously support this dominant system and its institutions. We all need to know that system applies to all of us. It is a system that gives me unearned privileges, and as author Layla Saad says, "We need to wake up to what is really going on."

Why am I like this? Here, I am talking about white fragility, a process that keeps white people in the centre, feeling

left out and upset if we are not noticed. Robin DiAngelo describes it as, "A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." For example, getting angry and defensive, arguing, being afraid, believing you are being shamed, crying, falling silent, doing something else because this is too uncomfortable and taking the victim role are using micro expressions of racism.

What have you noticed about your reaction to what I am saying? Do any of the above behaviours feel familiar just now?

Linking White Fragility to Overindulgent Parenting

But how do we become so fragile? I was brought up with the values of knowing my place, not upsetting people (especially in their own homes) and a range of other values that help me to be a functioning member of our pakeha-centric society - one that has been run by a pakeha dominant paradigm. Also, I grew up in a world where capitalism was king and in the last 50 years or so there has been a harder push towards individualism and marketing which is affecting how children are now growing up.

We don't stop - we keep learning from our mistakes, getting it wrong and staying strong because we will be able to live on this planet with others with whom we are all connected.

Mostly, we are not aware of how parents are pushed to feel stink about themselves and have to buy products they don't need, how they are pushed to feel they have to please their children. What this means is that many parents are unknowingly raising their children to be overindulged.

The pressures on parents today through television and movies, social media – Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, marketing, school, hopes and dreams, the housing market, children who pester, fatigue of parents, desire for a bit of peace and quiet, climate change, the Covid pandemic. The list goes on and on.

This is true, too, for children who are also pushed to be leaders in their families, to be aware of things that are beyond their influence. I saw a clip just this week marketing condoms, which truly puts children at the centre. All this leads many parents to parent in a way that can have a range of rather difficult outcomes for the child, such as the need for immediate gratification, the need to be the centre of the universe, having an overblown sense of entitlement, does not know how much is enough and becomes helpless with poor self control.

Other impacts may include becoming disrespectful of people and property, confusing needs and wants, having poor boundaries, being irresponsible, lacking everyday life skills, becoming ungrateful, having life goals of wealth, fame and image, culminating in relationship problems and a lack of connectedness to community.

You can see how growing up with these traits make it near impossible to be open to conversations about difference and racism.

We know that the system works to support itself, by keeping our white children fragile, and maintains power because it means we cannot engage in the conversation.

Taking Action- What Can You Do?

Learn about what being raised as an overindulged child is - what white fragility is and white supremacy may look like in our everyday behaviours.

Learn about your own culture (Yes, we all have one.) and learn what skills and knowledge we need to build our resilience. Learn about our history and the partnership the Crown made with Maori through the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and understand the power dynamics of an abusive relationship.

Do these things with others - have conversations that matter. Small groups, like book groups, need to come together and talk about how we can call in and call out racism. Take the conversation into different parts of your life. Fund those groups who are supporting this work, preferably indigenous groups.

Be prepared to go against the values of not upsetting people and knowing your place. Go on your own journey with it. Start today and keep going! We don't stop - we keep learning from our mistakes, getting it wrong and staying strong because we will be able to live on this planet with others with whom we are all connected. If we didn't know that before 2020, we certainly know it now. 🇵🇵



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