

Sister Who's Perspective

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Life is a collaborative effort, encompassing more than we know. In a time of abundant "information overload," news, communication, and travel across great distances, we often talk at each other without listening, communicating, or understanding.

Humanity needs its icons, but also its iconoclasts to grow beyond the good and bad qualities that now limit and describe us. The essences of both God and us remain, in the midst of questions, to be discovered, experienced, and expressed.

*Please share in this ongoing dialogue, remembering to indicate whether and how you wish to be identified.
Blessings, love, and peace to you. ---Sister Who*

Overview

Much like a coin, most things in life seem to have at least two sides to consider and this is especially true of language and words.

What matters more, but in various ways, are the intentions and feelings behind the words--the motivations and causes for the selection and expression of words (or, conversely, the carelessness with which we sometimes choose our words).

In this issue, four different dynamics or perspectives regarding the word "privilege" are considered, which are only the beginning of a wider discussion which could ultimately prove to be not only enlightening but also empowering to collaborative and friendly relationships with everyone around us. In finding ways to relate better to others, we can also find ways to relate better to ourselves.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Privilege Assigned

Whenever someone has described me as privileged, it has felt like a subtle attack, perhaps even an expression of envy (which, last I heard, was still considered to be a sin). Having recognized this, I avoid using the word toward anyone else.

If I am able to overlook that privilege of some sort has been assigned to me, I can instead use the person's accusation to inform me about what is missing from his or her life. For life to be as good as it can be within each and every person's life, we must all have ways to legitimately meet our needs and we must all respond positively whenever a need is made known. To do otherwise invites future times when we will experience needs and be equally unheard or, worse yet, punished in some way for expressing our needs to others.

The general American culture which has been collectively created by the contributions of literally millions of people, sees being in need as a weakness and very strongly encourages all

weaknesses to be hidden rather than made known and constructively resolved.

This is one general example of what one might call "punishing the victim." It's as if it is more wrong for a starving person to ask for food than for a person to be starving within a nation which has so much food that incomprehensible quantities go into trash cans and garbage dumps every day.

All that being said, it is still unhelpful and even adversarial rather than constructively collaborative to accuse someone who is not experiencing a particular need, of being privileged. To me, it doesn't even make sense.

The goal, after all, is not to create more people in need by giving each other a reason to avoid appearing "privileged," but rather to find ways by which everyone's needs can legitimately be met.

So why would anyone make such an accusation? One possible answer is that doing so creates distance between one's self and the unmet need. If I focus upon someone else's lack of generosity or consideration, I can distract myself from the pain of concealing my needs from others' view. Why would anyone conceal his or her needs? Because too often the response has been abandonment, apathy, and disregard--in effect the reduction of personal worth. If someone does not care whether I am hungry, then perhaps it's because I'm really not a valuable and worthy person.

That really is a terrible thing and it's quite understandable that anyone would want to avoid such an internal message.

The unconditional love of God says, "NO! Everyone is inherently a valuable and worthy person, even if at times they behave badly."

From this perspective, assigning privilege to others who seem unconcerned about our needs, is simply one of the sad ways by which we silence within ourselves the divine commandment to love.

No thank you. I'd rather choose love.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Privilege Denied

Within certain formal ceremonies of conveying legal and official identity, terminology which is used often includes some version of "...entitled to all the corresponding rights and privileges ...". Recognition of corresponding responsibilities is often overlooked, but that's a whole topic in and of itself, to be addressed at another time. The point I wish to make here is that privileges in this formal sense are legally conveyed to certain persons who have satisfied certain requirements in order to receive a particular legal status.

But what about those who are capable of satisfying such requirements or perhaps have even done so, but who are nevertheless denied by some means or another the usual conveyance of such rights and privileges? To go one step further, what about those to whom such rights and privileges have been legally conveyed who are then denied the freedom to exercise or receive those rights and privileges, resulting in legal action to demand compliance with public law, but only if the individual in question has sufficient funds to engage in what has become an extremely expensive judicial system of review? For those without sufficient funds, legal rights and privileges often exist in name only and rarely in practice.

There are at least two ways to consider the resulting situation. First, there is the person who appears arrogant, insisting that "it's my right" and being extremely and loudly offended by the fact that something clearly illegal happened. On the other hand, a nation into which people have been born through no choice of their own which is nevertheless unconcerned for the application of its laws to even its poorest citizens, is a nation without integrity, without decency, without virtue, undeserving of respect, and (more concisely) a nation of predominantly dirty rotten hypocrites.

To be a person of integrity, decency, virtue, respectability, and a person without hypocrisy, I must strive to be as good as my word and to be true to all of the commitments I have made, to the very best of my ability. If I discover that I will not be able after all to make good on my commitments, it is my responsibility to report this to all affected persons and to take whatever alternative actions I can, to encourage ongoing positive relationship. (Certainly all of this is equally true with regard to my relationship with God).

Privilege denied is about much more than

simply breaking the law, however, since it also takes value, ability, confidence, and peace from the one (or ones) most directly affected. Privilege denied is thus also a failure to love.

On that note, it seems to me that if we were all sincerely concerned about love and about addressing any and every instance in which love isn't happening (to the best of our individual and collective abilities), virtually every other problem we could name would be either prevented or remedied with only the most minimal amount of direct discussion of the problem.

On a slightly different note, however, there have been instances in which someone claimed to have been denied privileges when in fact the privileges in question had neither been earned nor ever legally conveyed. If I want to claim a privilege which is not actually mine, it is completely appropriate for the one to whom I am complaining to point that out to me, perhaps also describing what I would need to do in order to legitimately claim that particular privilege. In such instances, the target of my complaints is not being oppressive but rather has provided the information I need to guide the next steps of my personal journey through life. Hm. So sometimes privilege denied is NOT a failure to love but rather an honest evaluation of circumstances and relationships.

All that being said, because God is real (as well as for a lot of other reasons), even when privilege is denied, life goes on. Within my own experience, I have learned that (to use the metaphor of an office building) there is always a back door if for whatever reason the front door (the direct approach to a particular challenge) is locked or somehow rendered impassable. One of the fascinating quirks of life which I have discovered over the years, is that the search for the back door often yields lessons and deeper understandings of the building than those inside have acquired, such that when I do finally find the back door and enter into the building, I have a broader and deeper understanding of where I am than those who entered easily through the front door. One might even say that there are significant rewards to be gained by being willing to do things not always in the easiest way possible.

Perhaps this is the privilege having the ability to choose and of avoiding the front door and thereby finding a wealth of meaning and understanding within alternative approaches to life.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Privilege Given

Privileges are not only blessings but frequently also burdens by the responsibilities and functional roles they convey. A driver's license, for example, may convey the responsibility of providing transportation for those without this privilege. Additionally, the one with this particular privilege might have to accept the rigors of navigating busy highways and rush-hour traffic.

For such activities and relationships to be healthy and productive, however, another understanding must be present: that life and the world are shared spaces and that privileges and activities do not exist in isolation but rather in collaboration and harmony with millions of other similar and contrasting privileges.

Okay, fine. But is the giving of privileges an act of love or an act of oppression? What of those times when the giving of a privilege changes from one to the other? For example, a teacher temporarily assigns responsibility for maintaining order to a specific student, so that she can be absent from the room for a few moments. As a compliment which positively describes and acknowledges the student's good character, this privilege of being a temporary overseer is an act of love. A few moments later when the student is feeling frustrated by rising tides of chaos, the gift may feel oppressive, inspiring glances toward the door and "why isn't she back yet?" Years later, when the student has decided to become a teacher also, the past experiences might be invaluable to current challenges of maintaining an effective and focused learning environment. Was the gift a blessing or a curse? Actually it was both and also changed from one to the other.

On a different note, is privilege always a gift

***"Yet one more struggle --
perhaps unnecessary
to me personally
but essential
to the world around me
in ways
I may never fully understand."
-- Sister Who***

or is it sometimes earned? This depends upon how we use our language. For many, privileges which are earned are not truly privileges at all but rather the equivalent of wages, though not all privileges could be described this way.

I may earn the ability to be paid substantial amounts of money by being trained in medicine, law, or business. I might inherit a fortune I didn't earn, except by being loved by someone who had such financial resources to give. What if I earned that person's generosity by unconditionally loving that person in every way I could, and was quite surprised when I was informed that a sizeable inheritance was headed my way? Are wages the same as privileges?

Why is this even important to consider? Because of societal perceptions that those who have earned their blessings, somehow deserve more tolerance for whatever excesses in which they wish to engage, than those who did not. Personally I find this problematic because in striving to understand the healthy and proper role of money within human societies, I have tentatively concluded that money must be seen as a tool and not a measure; that it is a responsibility and an opportunity, not an excuse to be excessively self-indulgent and completely consumer-oriented (as one said, "conspicuous consumption"). Money is simply a tool by which one can leave the world a better place than one found it. This ability might also be considered a privilege, if the definition of a privilege is also its scarcity within certain contexts.

I struggle with the meanings of many words through the composition of these monthly newsletters, sometimes addressing topics which are clearly important but don't seem to be particularly essential for me to understand. The reason I continue to do this struggle, however, is that I learned long ago that my struggles are not always for me, but rather are sometimes for those who are watching and learning from all that is happening within my life.

Considering the interconnectedness of all things, there are a myriad of eyes watching each one of us, waiting to see how we handle the privileges each of us are given, to make the world an ever better place for each and every person to live. God is watching too, to see what sort of persons we will become within the vast world of opportunities, resources, and relationships we have been given. Why? Because we are loved.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Privilege Claimed

For all of the privileges which can be officially bestowed, legally given, or emphatically demanded, the ones which become most real are those which are actually claimed--with or without anyone else's approval or agreement.

If I purchase a small appliance from a department store, the usual current custom of business is that if the appliance fails to operate as intended by the manufacturer within the ninety days or so immediately following the time of purchase, I have the privilege of returning to the store where I purchased the item in order to receive a replacement. Items which are sold "as is," on the other hand, do not include this privilege. Even if the privilege is included, however, if I do not get to the store within the time allowed and claim the privilege, I will wind up with an appliance which does not work as it should and I will have no further recourse other than to spend a similar amount of money again in order to replace the item at my own expense.

As a person, if I do not claim privileges conveyed by laws designed to create equal opportunity and treatment, I will also live in situations which cost me in ways that I may not be able to afford. If the nation within which I live denies privileges unfairly to others and I do not claim my privilege to speak on their behalf, I sow the seeds of my own needs being someday overlooked as well.

Regardless of whether I claim privileges for myself or for others, the constructive and collaborative relationships which virtually all privileges are designed to serve, form the tightly interwoven fabric of the world in which we live. Although we may each be but one thread or one small bundle of threads, the integrity of each thread is what creates the integrity of the fabric and a tear which begins with a single thread may easily spread to those around it and ultimately across the entire expanse of the cloth.

The most important privilege to claim, therefore, is the privilege of loving one another--a privilege conveyed by God who loves each of us as well; a privilege which is inseparable from the ability and freedom to choose specifically because without the freedom to choose otherwise, love itself would have no integrity. More concisely, love would not be love. Thankfully, this is not the case.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be!

On a Personal Note

In only a few more months, my coursework for a master of theological studies degree will be complete. I am both excited and anxious; I do not know what will follow or even in which direction to look. Certainly God will guide me, but the journey is nerve-racking nevertheless. Much like the numerous times when I drove my Suzuki Samurai to the top of a particular mountain in the past, I must keep moving no matter how narrow or rough the road is. The experience of a mountaintop always dispelled every temptation to regret my perseverance along the way. I believe this will be true of my journey through graduate school also.

In approximately one more week, after literally years of waiting, it appears that the footage for the new introduction to the television show "Sister Who Presents..." will be recorded. Hopefully this will open the door to a great many wonderful opportunities and future endeavors.

Having negotiated the necessary funds in exchange for resetting a friend's flagstone sidewalk, in late July and early August I will be traveling to Montreal, Quebec, Canada, for the first World OutGames to participate once more in physique/bodybuilding.

It feels somewhat as if I have come full circle, since the genesis of Sister Who was initiated when I participated in the Gay Games in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in 1990. Once again, I have decided that I am going for my own reasons and am happy to relinquish any cut-throat competitive drive to others who wish to measure their involvement only by the gold, silver, and bronze medals to be awarded to the top three contenders in each category. Considering that Sister Who would most likely not exist were it not for the Games in 1990, I think I won a far greater prize by being there. Perhaps I am about to enter a new and significantly greater form of this unconventional ministry, by my participation in Montreal. By the blessing of God, may it be so.

May God's blessings, love, and peace be with you now and always, *Sister Who*

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Sister Who, PO Box 593, Westminster, CO 80036

Email: dn@sisterwho.com

Internet website: <http://www.sisterwho.com>