



Reflecting on the Oppressor in the Mirror

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Introduction

'I'm not saying that white people *are* better, I'm saying that being white is *clearly* better, who can even argue with that? And I'm a man. How many advantages can one person have? I'm a white *man*. You can't even hurt my feelings' (Louis CK, American Comedian).

When I started writing, I had no intention of inserting myself into the story, but I found it was unavoidable. I planned only on writing a critique of how patriarchy manifests online. However, every time I started to read and re-read articles about recent happenings in cyberspace, many of which I had followed in real-time, I just got depressed and heartbroken. Twitter hashtags like #solidarityisforwhitewomen and #FBRape have tremendous power and importance. The former sparked conversations around intersectionality that have needed to occur for years. The

latter succeeded in securing a commitment from Facebook to review its reporting policies. Yet, when I tried to revisit them and get inspired to write about patriarchy and how it has migrated from offline spaces to online pages, I found myself tired.

I am tired of talking about race. I am tired of talking about gender. I am tired of talking about violence, societal privilege, power and oppression. I'm tired of all of it. I just want to be silent. Unfortunately, being straight and white and male in America, I have that privilege, as do many of my peers in the dominant groups to which I belong. I have the privilege to ignore patriarchy because it favors me. I can turn a blind eye to suffering and a deaf ear to calls for justice and still be just fine. Honestly, it is in my self-interest to maintain the status quo. In every facet of society, be it business, government, or culture, it is in my best interest to stay quiet.

I have the privilege to stay silent, but the responsibility to speak up. The thoughts on these pages are humbly submitted as my contribution to an on-going conversation on breaking down patriarchy. Throughout history some of the most profound social change has come when people unite beyond race, gender and class identity to work together for a shared vision for a community, a country or the world.

The Importance of Intersectionality and Inclusion

If we are going to have an inclusive world, we must first have an inclusive movement and, in my country at least, it is becoming more and more evident that we do not. A spotlight was shone on this issue very recently with the emergence of the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen discussion on Twitter. Activist Mikki Kendall started the hashtag after some incredibly reprehensible behavior on the part of self-described male feminist Hugo Schwyzer and in response to the white feminists who helped him gain a platform to gain notoriety while seemingly ignoring the concerns of women of color about him. However, as she states, the underlying issue was much more pervasive:

'When I launched the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, I thought it would largely be a discussion between people impacted by the latest bout of problematic behavior from mainstream white feminists. It was intended to be Twitter shorthand for how often feminists of color are told that the racism they experience "isn't a feminist issue". The first few tweets reflect the deeply personal impact of such a long-running structural issue.

As the hashtag spread across Twitter, people from all walks of life started joining in – to vent their own personal frustrations, as well as to address larger political issues. Feminism as a global movement meant to unite all women has global responsibilities, and – as illustrated by hundreds of tweets – has failed at one of the most basic: it has not been welcoming to all women, or even their communities' (Kendall, 2013).

Activism that occurs online is often diminished and dismissed by those that think that change cannot happen 140 characters at a time. However, the conversation started by Kendall has led to a renewed dialogue about intersectionality and inclusion with many others weighing in, not only on Twitter, but in their own long-form articles. Lauren Walker wrote on how she has struggled to reconcile her race and her place in the feminist movement:

'I kept noticing more and more examples of pointed erasure of women who looked like me from feminism, and my dissatisfaction became greater and greater. I had never heard of the work of black and brown feminists as a child not because we were unworthy, nonexistent, or only there to be saved; it was because they were being consciously disregarded' (Walker, 2013).

Personally, I'm disappointed in myself for not speaking up about Schwyzer previously. I chose to be paralyzed by inability to fix the problem rather than using whatever platform I did have to speak out. We need to get better at holding each other accountable. As Martin Luther King Junior said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

The Role of Men in the Movement

It should not take a trending topic to break through the noise and the consciousness of a nation. And we should no longer tolerate men like Hugo Schwyzer masquerading as feminists. There are times I am given undue credit just for being a man and caring about equity and equality. Speaking up and speaking out should not be special. It should be commonplace. My fellow white, cisgendered, straight male peers should be paying special attention to this conversation that is taking place.

Writer Laurie Penny brought an insightful perspective to systemic sexism recently that speaks to the challenges of engaging men in these conversations:

'What we don't say is: of course not all men hate women. But culture hates women, so men who grow up in a sexist culture have a tendency to do and say sexist things, often without meaning to. We aren't judging you for who you are but that doesn't mean we're not asking you to change your behaviour. What you feel about women in your heart is of less immediate importance than how you treat them on a daily basis.

You can be the gentlest, sweetest man in the world yet still benefit from sexism. That's how oppression works. Thousands of otherwise decent people are persuaded to go along with an unfair system because it's less hassle that way. The appropriate response when somebody demands a change in that unfair system is to listen, rather than turning away or

yelling, as a child might, that it's not your fault. And it isn't your fault. I'm sure you're lovely. That doesn't mean you don't have a responsibility to do something about it' (Penny, 2013).

It is up to us to ask, *"How do we get those with tremendous societal privilege to work for equality when they they may see it as against their best interest?"*

The more and more I reflect on that question, the less and less I feel qualified to answer it. I have always been uncomfortable with the privilege that I've been afforded by patriarchy. It has taken me my entire young adult life to come to terms with it and during that time I shied away from spending too much time with other people that looked like me and had the same level of societal privilege I had.

Honestly, I can trace it back to my childhood. Growing up, the majority of my friends were either African-American men or white women. I was bullied mercilessly growing up and often times it was for whom I chose to associate. I remember being called a "n****r lover" and having constant accusations about my sexuality due to the number of my female friends and my persistent singlehood. My unwillingness to pile on when other students were talking about sexual conquests (real or imagined) and my sheer discomfort with hearing women being referred to in the most animalistic of terms led to much torment at the hands of peers. So I retreated to my comfort zone and in my case that was with those with whom I shared little in life experience or gender identity. Looking back, I believe I took pride in the fact that I thought I was voluntarily surrendering my privilege. Now I know better.

I know that the privileges afforded to me are embedded into our society. No matter how I try, I cannot forfeit them. The best I can hope to do is work as an ally to combat systemic oppression and ensure equality for all people. I'm tremendously grateful for how much my childhood informed my sense of self and my ability to understand a level of shared humanity that remains regardless of the color of your skin, your sexual orientation or your gender identity. Now though, I'm realizing that somewhere along the way I stopped seeing the humanity in people who remain totally ignorant to their privilege. How do you engage dominant groups in a conversation when raising the topics that implicate the individual for behavior that they might not even in engage in personally?

As I've become a more and more outspoken advocate for equality in all its forms, I've been awakened to the fact that I don't know how to talk in language familiar to my privileged peers. I identify as a male feminist and that has the tendency to solicit some interesting reactions. Some view 'male feminist' as a contradiction in terms, but the core of feminism is a belief that all people deserve to be treated fairly and justly regardless of gender identity. As a firm believer in the need for an equitable future for all people, there is no more natural affiliation for me. When I step before a room of people to talk about equality, assumptions of my worldview

abound based on my privilege. When I confound those expectations, I have no problem finding common ground and shared humanity with those who are systematically oppressed. Finding common ground with people like me, members of the oppressive group, is the challenge.

In my experience, conversation often dissolves into an argument about power as if only a finite amount of it exists and that if I lift up a class of people that I do not belong to then they win and I lose. We create sides in a war and attack each other and the system wins. And when the system wins, the dominant group wins. Theoretically, as a member of so many dominant groups, I win in that circumstance. However, it certainly feels like a pyrrhic victory. Something in the very core of who I am makes me recoil from any framing that pits sides against each other. I still don't have an answer to how do we best engage people in order to build the base of support that we need to change our oppressive systems. I only have new questions. One thing I do know though is that if we do not see the humanity in all people then our cause is destined to fail. The concept of Ubuntu, as exposed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has informed my thinking around moving beyond an 'us versus them' mentality and toward a 'we are them' mentality. So as we embark on this journey together, I leave you with these words on shared humanity from someone much more enlightened than myself:

'In our country we've got something called Ubuntu. When I want to praise you, I say "this person has Ubuntu". Because in our culture there is no such thing as a solitary individual. We say a person is a person through other persons. That we belong in the bundle of life. And I want you to be all you can be, because that's the only way I can be all I can be. I need you! I need you to be you so that I can be me' (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, October 2007).

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