# The Privilege of Privilege

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**YouTube Recording**

Good morning, Wabash. Thanks to Sphinx Club and especially Nathan Bode for inviting me to give this talk. I am honored to participate in a tradition that respects the power of oratory. I imagine there are high expectations given that I'm a rhetoric professor but it may provide comfort to know that even we get nervous before speaking.

I'm partially feeling nervous because of the sensitive nature of my topic. I want to talk about social privilege and, more specifically, the privilege of having social privilege.

Social privilege has been discussed a lot lately, especially among youth. The common warning to college students that they should "check their privilege" spawned a viral article in the *Princeton Tory* this past spring. Situations such as those in Ferguson, Missouri prompt questions about, among other things, "white privilege" and race relations. And Christian privilege was on display last week when the Kansas City Chiefs safety Husain Abdullah received an excessive celebration penalty for praying in a non-privileged format. I suppose we're just used to the Tebow.

At Wabash, we see this conversation as well. In the classroom, EQ discussions seem to inevitably tackle the concept of privilege, for instance when discussing the options available to Wes Moore and the other Wes Moore. And most recently, some of you have been yaking about the idea of privilege as it relates to the responsible use of social media.

Today I will add to this ongoing discussion but I hope to provide a different vantage point that seeks to reclaim the potential of privilege.

Like most chapel talks, my discussion is motivated by a deep sense of commitment to and love for Wabash. And, like most chapel talks, it will be personal as well as political. I will first spend some time with the concept itself before turning to the privilege of privilege.

So what is social privilege? For an initial definition, I went to an authoritative source. No, not Wikipedia, but the Oxford English Dictionary. The OED defines privilege as "A right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by an individual . . . beyond the usual rights or advantages of others." So for privilege to exist there must be a baseline for most people above which others have an advantage.

One common usage today addresses privilege in relation to social identity categories, such as race, biological sex, religion, age. You might visualize this kind of privilege through the metaphor of a slot machine**.**

On this slot machine, each reel represents a different characteristic of your social identity. One reel cycles through all the race options and combinations and lands on your racial

identity. One reel selects your biological sex. There are reels for a variety of additional qualities: your ability status, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, etc.

And just like a real slot machine, the various combinations in the privilege slots come with different payouts (something I'll return to in a bit).

Ladies and gentlemen, in the privilege slot machine I hit the jackpot!

I'm white. Cha-ching.
I'm male. Cha-ching.
I live in the United States of America. Cha-ching.
I grew up in a suburban, middle class household with a nuclear family. Cha-ching.
I am in a marriage that is recognized by both my state—Cha-ching—and my church—Cha-ching.
I have a bachelors, masters, and PhD. Cha-ching, Cha-ching, Cha-ching.
And I am a professor at *the* liberal arts college for men. Can I get a "cha-ching"?

At this point, I might seem like an unlikely candidate to talk about the idea of privilege. Let me assure you, I didn't choose this topic so you could all bask in the majestic glory of my privilege.

Rather, it's related to how I spent my summer vacation. I participated in two workshops at Hope College, led by Brenda Allen and Cate Palczewski, that challenged me to think differently about my role as professor, as advocate, and as a privileged human being.

Some of you may also know that I'm team-teaching a course about social movements with Prof. Gelbman. There's been a lot of talk about changing the world in that class which, I would venture, has inspired some of the ideas here. But don't worry, this is not an appeal designed to spark and mobilize a social movement.

No, I have a more modest aim: I will use the slot machine metaphor to offer 3 propositions about privilege in the hopes that we, as a community, can think about our own *personal* opportunities for action.

**Proposition 1:** the payouts of privilege exist and these payouts differ from individual to individual.

Who here is left-handed? Those who raised their hands likely understand the privilege given to right handed people. Others of you may think this a trivial point. Think again. I encourage you to speak with a left hander about how the world privileges right-handers.

I'm familiar with the plight of left-handers because both my mom and sister are left-handed and my brother has literally swung both ways for years. So in my nuclear family of five, only my dad and I have truly felt at home taking notes in class without smudges, using scissors, or playing a video game. This isn't to say that there's explicit discrimination

against left-handed people but that the world is built in a way that advantages those who are right-handed.

The same is true of other, perhaps more significant, social identity categories. To demonstrate, I want to use a hypothetical situation but draw on real research to show how privilege might be active.

Let's start with the fact that my name sounds white—that's not the hypothetical part; do a Google image search for "Jeff" and you'll see lots of white faces looking back at you.

Now suppose I was searching for a job—this is the hypothetical part. Because my name sounds white, I am more likely to get a job interview were I to apply. A *Huffington Post* article last month featured a man named Jose who applied for numerous jobs but received no interviews. So he dropped a single letter on his resume—going by Joe instead of Jose—and the story changed. His experience confirms existing research published in sources such as the *American Economic Review* that employers have implicit bias against names that signal certain races or ethnicities.

So I get a job interview thanks to my name. Now, because I am male, I am more likely to get a job offer after that interview.

A number of studies, some as recent as last year, suggest that men enjoy privileges over women in this regard. A 2007 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* found this privilege to be even more striking in relation to mothers. What's fascinating about this study is that they found the opposite for fathers, who employers viewed as *more* committed to their jobs and offered *higher* starting salaries than nonfathers.

So I get this hypothetical job. Luckily, because I *am* a white male, people won't wonder whether or not I'm an affirmative action hire.

And because my anatomy matches my gender identity, I'm more likely to get raises and less likely to get fired from that job if you trust the 2007 report from the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, which I'm inclined to do.

None of this has anything to do with my qualifications but rather my social identity. And because much of this occurs implicitly as existing bias rather than explicitly as discrimination, privileged individuals ought to be aware of these biases.

Let's bring it closer to home with a real scenario right here at Wabash: Because I am able bodied, I can physically reach my campus office.

Many of us may not even be aware that half of the academic buildings on campus have faculty offices or classrooms that are inaccessible to those who physically cannot use stairs. I currently have an enrolled student who is in a boot for the semester and has to prop it up on a wheeled device. Although we were able to move our classroom from Fine Arts to

Baxter, he is unable to "drop in" on my office to say hello, discuss the class, or chat about life.

We do a disservice to the student body if we say come to Wabash to enjoy close relationships with you faculty, but only if you have the physical ability to reach them. If we are serious about our commitment to recruiting and retaining students who represent all kinds of diversity, then we need to address these elements of privilege on campus.

This example leads to **Proposition 2**: privilege is often unseen and unintentional. I won't spend a lot of time on this proposition but I want to emphasize that privilege is not the same thing as discrimination. I like the slot machine metaphor because it emphasizes how most elements of our social identity are about luck rather than choice.

And because those who benefit from privilege often do so through little effort or fault of their own, we tend to overlook the operations of privilege around us until we are in a situation where we lack privilege.

Certainly some use their privilege to actively discriminate but privilege itself is not inherently wicked.

And so my **third and final proposition:** Embrace the privilege of privilege.

Here, I'm playing on a double-meaning of the word. One meaning revolves around the social benefits that I've been talking about to this point. But privilege also refers to an honor or treat. This is the meaning of the word you'll use later today when you relive this speech and say "it was a privilege to hear Dr. Drury's chapel talk."

So the privilege of privilege simply means that we recognize the honor that goes along with accepting the benefits we receive on the basis of our social identities.

And let me clear: I use "we" and "our" here intentionally. Every single person in this room has some form of social privilege. If you disagree, speak with me after my talk or send me an e-mail. I'd love to have a conversation with you about this.

While you and I cannot change the roots of our privilege short of fundamentally changing our identities, we can be aware of it and harness that privilege in ways that make a difference. For example, my privilege has given me resources and platforms—such as chapel talks—that I can use to raise awareness about ability privilege on campus.

So let me offer two calls to action.

First, become aware of your privilege. I hope my talk has helped with this but I encourage you to spend a day seriously thinking about how other people might have a harder time doing the things you do simply because of identity traits beyond their control.

I recently spoke with Sky King and Mark Troiano about a social experiment that they are looking to launch this month. When we had the conversation, they had no idea that I was giving this chapel talk but their experiment—called "A New Day"—is a perfect example of what awareness might look like in practice.

They will spend the 24hrs on October 25th, 2014, blindfolded. Their goal is to grow within themselves, to better appreciate and understand what they have, and to see how resilient they can be when something they rely on is taken away. In the language of my talk, they are trying to understand the privilege that goes along with sight. Though the focus is deeply personal to them, they believe their message will resonate with the Wabash community and the greater humanity so they will be sharing their experiences leading up to, during and after the project through their tumblr http://prjanewday.tumblr.com.

They illustrate how we can step outside of our comfort zones and be inspired to live life a little differently, if only for a day. This effort helps build empathy, a feeling with others. I encourage you to support their experiment and follow their lead.

Empathy is a good starting place but it's not enough. There's a reason the defining statements of this College emphasize action, not feeling. The mission statement's call to live humanely and act responsibly. The Gentleman's Rule focus on conduct on and off campus. And last week Greg Estel emphasized the action promoted by Old Wabash. In a few minutes, when we rise to sing this hallowed song as you will make a promise that "Forever more as in days of yore Their deeds be noble and grand."

These are not mere platitudes that sound nice on the back of a business card. So, don't check your privilege by putting it aside and repressing it. And don't just recognize your privilege. Rather, embrace it, love it, celebrate it, and leverage it. Leverage it for good, keeping in mind, if you'll indulge my adaptation here, that with great privilege comes great responsibility.

This is not a general appeal for humane living. We all know, for instance, how the community service projects that comprise WABASH Day this weekend help us live out this pillar.

No, my call to action requires *less* time but *more* courage. I ask you to use your privilege to become an ally through involvement and speaking out for those who have less voice than you.

As I worked on this talk, I thought about dozens of people in this community who represent what I'm talking about and, in an earlier version, I started naming some of their good works. But then I decided doing so would make the privilege of privilege seem like a grand gesture for the sake of recognition rather than involving small, everyday acts that improve the community by sending good ripples in directions that we may not even notice.

Some of you, especially those from a Christian tradition, may initially think of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you'd have done to yourself.

But the Golden Rule implies an equality among people—that your wants and needs are the same as others.

So you might then go to the Silver Rule, do *not* do to others what you would *not* have them do unto you. A sense of "do no harm" or "turn the other cheek." This is perhaps a better starting point but it focuses on a *lack* of action rather than a proactive stance.

The privilege of privilege, on the other hand, recognizes that each of us is different but is no less human and acts upon that principle.

So let me talk at a more abstract level about what these people do. True allies refrain from saying the "funny" thing at the expense of other cultures. True allies reach out to someone who is struggling to fit in simply because he is different. True allies stand up for those who don't have the resources to do so themselves.

These are the students who use their privilege, for instance, to challenge those who make fun of their fellow Wallies because they aren't privileged enough to afford new clothes, to speak English as a first language, or to love people of the opposite sex.

These are the faculty, staff, and administration who work hard to avoid implicit bias when serving on hiring committees and use their authority to change norms or structures that prioritize one social identity group's experience at the expense of another's.

Lord knows that I'm not a shining example of this courageous advocacy. For me, it's an ongoing process and I constantly have to make the effort to be inclusive. It's much easier to sit in my cozy bubble of privilege or to focus on my own experience and goals at the expense of others'.

When I moved my classroom from Fine Arts to Baxter, I'm ashamed to admit that my initial reaction was frustration at the inconvenience it caused my daily routine. After all, we all know that the Fine Arts Center is *so far* from everything else that it often requires the use of a vehicle.

But then I realized that I was being selfish. And I thought about how the student must feel that he might have this conversation four or five times, with each of his professors. That he is marked from the first day as someone who needs special treatment. That he is different, if only until the boot comes off. Of course, there are also some for whom the boot—metaphorically speaking—never comes off.

And so I thought about all the persuasion research demonstrating that people are more effective advocates if they argue for things that go against or have little impact on their own self-interest. I realized the message for change could be more, not less, powerful if it came from me, a privileged individual with little personal stake beyond my own concern for others.

One of my personal heroes is Robert F. Kennedy. For me, he is a model of this kind of audacity. He was privileged—probably more than anyone in this room—and he could have easily ignored his fellow humans. But he had the courage and compassion to fight injustice and ally with those less fortunate than himself. If you haven't read Thurston Clarke's *The Last Campaign* about Kennedy's presidential bid, I highly recommend it.

In it, Clarke explains how Kennedy spoke out for Native American youth. In politics, he used his Senate seat to advocate for numerous policies to assist Native Americans. In speeches, he talked about the poverty and high suicide rates in the community. And in his campaign, he visited dozens of reservations, to the dismay of campaign managers. After all, Native Americans aren't a substantial portion of the electorate.

Sure, Kennedy cared about votes and he didn't dedicate his life to Native American advocacy. Yet, for him, the morally courageous action on this topic superseded the politically advantageous one.

This explains why he gave Democratic delegates in South Dakota only a few minutes to meet with him on April 16, 1968, but he spent 12 hours at the Pine Ridge Reservation, a place Clarke describes as "the ground zero of human suffering on the North American continent." It's also a place that no presidential candidate has visited since.

In one of his campaign speeches, Kennedy eloquently asked Americans to remember, and I quote, "that those who live with us are our brothers [and sisters], that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek - as we do - nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can."

As I conclude, let me remark that the privilege of privilege doesn't demand that we abandon all else to selflessly serve others, although there is certainly honor in that.

It does ask, however, that we think critically about our own sources of privilege, respect our own humanity and the humanity of others, and lead when others lack the courage or privilege to do so.

We are given such a gift to be here. The privilege of living in this country, of getting a first rate education or being gainfully employed by this wonderful and historic institution, these are things that many in the world will never experience.

So use your privilege to fight the good fight. Not to make *yourself* feel better but to make a difference. Doing so will help us better fulfill our College's mission and make us worthy of the tradition we inherit. Thank you.