

White Privilege as an Addiction*
by
Gail K. Golden, Ed.D, LCSW

As we come to understand something about institutional racism, we begin to have some clarity about how people of color can be made ill by endless and unrelenting assaults against their very being. We learn about internalized racial inferiority and the toll it takes on people of color. We begin to understand the impact of racism on the physical, emotional and financial health of people of color.

What we are much less attuned to is internalized racial superiority and the ways in which being part of a dominating culture creates its own pathology, that of white privilege. The following are some preliminary observations about distorted thoughts and feelings precipitated by Internalized Racial Superiority.

1. Our ideas about what is 'normal' are very culture bound in ways we often do not see.
2. We have an exaggerated sense of the rightness of our own ideas and opinions, often diminishing contributions of people of color. ('White is Right'.)
3. We have a sense of entitlement which can create an exaggerated sense of outrage when our expectations are disappointed.
4. Even those of us committed to social justice feel we can pick and choose when and where to speak out when we perceive racist behaviors.
5. We feel guilty for our participation in a racist society and often want our guilt to be assuaged by people of color.
6. We tend to argue with people of color about THEIR experience. The idea that we know better is one of the ultimate expressions of the exaggerated sense of rightness mentioned above.
7. Those of us who are white and who count ourselves successful tend to believe that we have earned our success through hard work and focus. We rarely see that unearned benefits associated with whiteness have

contributed to our prosperity.

In thinking about these manifestations of internalized racial superiority and the ways in which we as white people fail to give up these behaviors, I have begun to think about White Privilege as an addiction.

[American Society of Addiction Medicine](#) observes:

“... addiction is characterized by impairment in behavioral control, craving, inability to consistently abstain, and diminished recognition of significant problems with one’s behaviors and interpersonal relationships. Like other chronic diseases, addiction can involve cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive...”

In a racist society, those of us who are called white passively enjoy the benefits of whiteness. We do not have to DO anything in particular for the system to continue to work to our benefit. But we certainly enjoy the benefits, whether the enjoyment is conscious or unconscious. And I believe that we are psychologically dependent on the rewards of privilege. We tend to perpetuate behaviors that support inequity, despite the negative consequences of which we are aware.

In AA, people talk about ‘stinkin thinkin’. This refers to the disordered thought process that accompanies addictive use of a substance. As I have suggested above, I maintain that along with the psychological dependence on the feelings and rewards of power and dominance, white people think in a disordered way about race, power and privilege.

Yet as white individuals, we have choices. We can opt for the sanity of anti-racist acts and thoughts. But because of the addictive nature of power, I believe we need to commit to a life time of active, intentional recovery work, in the same ways that alcoholics always have to work at sobriety. Addicts who are seriously committed to recovery work continuously to support their progress. They can never assume they are ‘finished’ with their work. It is ongoing.

AA has steps to recovery. I am suggesting that those of us who are called white need to think seriously about overcoming our addictive relationship to power, dominance and privilege and am suggesting our own twelve steps in a lifetime of recovery work:

- 1 We admitted we were powerless over our socialization into a racist society.
2. We came to understand that working to undo racism could restore us to sanity.
3. We came to understand that we could not do this work alone and made a decision to accept leadership from people of color.
4. We make an honest inventory of how we participate in racist policies and practices.
5. We begin to address these wrongs by learning and teaching accurate history.
6. We pledge to educate ourselves and organize to undo racism, always remaining accountable to people of color.
7. We recognize that this is a lifelong process. It is a way of life that must be guided by Undoing Racism Principles.
8. We commit to learn how internalized racial superiority has distorted our thoughts and assumptions, and work to clarify our thinking.
9. As white people, we have been oblivious to the racism in our families, schools, offices, faith communities and we seek to address such wrongs wherever possible. If we are gatekeepers, (i.e. control access to resources), we will work to allocate these resources more equitably.
10. We agree to learn to celebrate our own culture so we do not exploit the culture of other peoples.
- 11 We will seek to learn how racism was created so we can improve our conscious awareness of the sometimes invisible arrangement that perpetuates racism.
- 12 We commit to carrying our antiracist message to other white people.

Ron Chisom, co-founder of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, teaches us that racism dehumanizes, and anti-racism humanizes. For

those of us called white, there are many challenges as we confront our addiction to power and privilege. The work to undo racism is hard, but Ron also teaches us that it gives us life. There are real rewards for working to recover from our addiction to white privilege.

*All of the ideas in this piece have been learned from or inspired by The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). PISAB is a national and international collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social transformation. Their two and a half day workshop, Undoing Racism is a life changing introduction to anti-racist thinking and organizing.

Special thanks to Sandra Bernabei, LCSW , founder of the Anti-Racist Alliance for her invaluable help crafting the twelve steps, and to Diana Dunn, core trainer at PISAB, who told me to keep writing.

And always to Ron Chisom and David Billings , PISAB, whose teaching keeps teaching.

Gail K. Golden, Ed.D, LCSW is Clinical Director of VCS Inc. in New City NY, a family service agency with a social justice mission. She also co-chairs the Rockland immigration Coalition and is a founding member of the Anti-Racist Alliance.

For more information see: www.pisab.org, www.antiracistalliance.com and www.goldenwrites.com

© Gail Golden 2011. Paper may be reproduced with appropriate credits.
Contact Gail Golden at: peacepoet@aol.com