

## **Advantages I Took for Granted-- Being a White, Upper-class, Female Parent of Public School Students in the New York Suburbs**

--Anne Nissen

“Home is where the heart is.” But everyone knows that living as a family is more challenging and complicated than that suggests. Parents devote enormous amounts of energy to the care, feeding, and character development of their children, while also running their households and working--or searching for work--so they can pay their bills. Parents also adjust to ever-changing circumstances and have to summon up additional energy any time a significant problem arises—as can happen in any family, at any time (problems such as an unexpected health issue and its associated costs, work problems, or emotional challenges).

Millions of parents contend with additional, serious challenges: They grapple with the ever-present, dismal difficulties that come from living on a low income, or from being part of a marginalized group—and, often, from both challenges.

When I began working with families in suburban Rockland County, New York, I worried that I might be limited or blinded by the worldview I’d grown up with. How could I interact with people “starting from where they are,” as I was urged to do, if I only understood where I was? (I knew that people innately hunger for friendship, and connect with other people who demonstrate that they understand them—and so I would need to understand.) And would I mistake strengths parents had for problems?

Reading “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,”<sup>1</sup> a paper by Peggy McIntosh, helped me look beyond my normal world. In this paper, Dr. McIntosh lists forty-six “ordinary and daily ways” in which she had unknowingly experienced having “white privilege.” Once she started looking for and finding the advantages she was given, she recorded them, for instance number 27: “I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.”

Dr. McIntosh had observed through her work in women’s studies that men often do not see that they benefit from unrecognized privileges, that they’re toting an “invisible backpack” of advantages. They don’t see that when they speak over female co-workers during meetings, for example, they are denying their female co-workers the chance to say what they think. That is, “hierarchies in our society are interlocking”; an advantage for one comes at someone else’s expense. She realized that this might be true in terms of race as well—as a white woman, her privileges could come at the expense of women of color.

So I, too, set out to look for the “special circumstances and conditions I experience which I did not earn but which I have been made to feel are mine by birth.” Dr. McIntosh focused on racial disparities, but my lens also included issues related to income and immigration status.

In addition, I wanted to think about how women’s actions as parents might be impaired by their challenges. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has determined that what all children need in order to thrive is to grow up in safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and

---

<sup>1</sup> Published by Wellesley College’s Center for Research on Women in 1988 (Working Paper No. 189).

environments.<sup>2</sup> When under stress, some parents—not all—have a difficult time sustaining positive environments inside their home. If a family is often forced to move or lives in a challenged neighborhood, providing those safe, stable, and nurturing environments is all the harder, if not impossible, even for parents with the best of intentions. Finally, if a parent’s pride takes a hit, how does that play out at home? This is why the advantages recorded below include problems that face adults as individuals, not exclusively as parents.

I listened closely to what more enlightened women than I had to tell me, and added some of their observations to my own. Here, then, is a list of advantages women such as myself have.

1. My house has enough heat in winter. Its rooms have light and fresh air. The appliances work. It’s comfortable.
2. My house is not located next to railroad tracks or a business. We don’t live in an apartment or a basement. Nor do we live on top of each other in one room, or inside a house shared with other families, with a joint kitchen. I can think and relax here.
3. I feel like I belong just about everywhere I go, from Macy’s to trendy downtowns and offices. In fact, I don’t even notice that I feel like I belong, and it wouldn’t occur to me that someone might monitor what I’m doing while I’m there. But if I go into poor neighborhoods, I once would have felt entirely lost and nervous (happily, now, not so much).
4. I take our family on trips to New York City to visit popular sites, even though a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, costs us well over \$100. Most museum “masterpieces” reflect our culture—the faces that look back at us from the artworks on the museum’s walls look generally like ours.
5. The curriculum in my children’s schools also mostly share my cultural references. (In the textbooks, American citizens are always heroes in the end, whatever their entanglement with citizens of other countries.)
6. Our schools have PTAs that are able to give financial support when the principal asks for it—and the district has a nonprofit “friends” groups to provide even more support for even more extras.
7. A school secretary greets me with warmth, not with the evident suspicion I’ve seen shown to parents who clearly struggle to get by. So, if I have something to say or a problem, I have no reason not to articulate it.
8. There is no reason for my husband and me to ask (or try to force) our teenager to drop out of high school to help pay rent.
9. My children are thought of as children of promise by us, by their teachers, and by themselves. The lingo is that we are watching them “blossom.” I don’t believe that I need to make my children tough in order to deal with what awaits them in the future.
10. No administrator says that, “realistically,” kids like mine don’t perform well in school.
11. I don’t worry that asking school officials questions may expose that I am parenting my children in ways that my family members have always considered to be right but that schools consider odd or questionable.
12. I don’t have to think about the fact that school districts in our county are in fact *segregated*, especially economically, with respective average scores that track every stereotype of rich v. poor outcomes. Merging districts to dissolve the concentration of students who need help the most, possibly at my children’s expense, is unthinkable. Who would vote for that, as state law requires for redistricting? Would I?

---

<sup>2</sup> See the “Essentials for Childhood” section of the “Violence Prevention” part of the CDC website.

13. I went to college, so I know our children need to keep taking math even if they don't like it, and a foreign language, etc. We take them to visit our alma maters. We're comfortable with how we're steering them. College is in the air.
14. If one of our daughters encounters a crisis that can be solved with \$400<sup>3</sup>, we can find it. When she is a child or adult, we can be her financial "safety net" if needed.
15. We can pay the fees charged by sport leagues and afterschool programs.
16. We have dental insurance. It isn't great coverage, but in any case I can take our children to the dentist when they need to go. I won't have to resort to using superglue to fix painful, cracked teeth or cavities, the solution used by others who aren't so fortunate.
17. We have health insurance.
18. I don't need to rely on one of my children to translate for me at their doctor visits, let alone at one of my doctor visits.
19. If a recipe calls for the use of a food processor, we have one. (Well, we don't, but we could.) Advice for homeowners on television and in the newspaper is relevant. ("Spend x thousands of dollars and you can have two sinks in your bathroom, too.")
20. The food we eat does not come out of cans or boxes that we picked up at a food pantry. Therefore, in order to feed our children, I didn't have to assemble each and every one of the many forms of eligibility documentation that most food banks require in order to be given food on a regular basis: ID, proof of address, birth certificates, report cards, pay stubs, tax returns, and more.
21. We buy a steak to celebrate a milestone. We know no elected official is discussing whether or not to pass a law to prevent us from doing so in the future, since we're not on the SNAP/food stamp program. No one tells us that an occasional extravagance is wrong. Until I learned what it stood for at work, I didn't know what SNAP or EBT meant. (S is for *Supplemental*, acknowledgment that not enough food is provided by this government program. Parents also need to get their hands on more food from a charity or other source.) Our children do not show up to school hungry.
22. We aren't limited to purchasing what we need from discount stores, so we don't wind up buying poor quality items that quickly break, disappointing our children and ourselves. I might splurge on a piece of artwork or furniture that is labelled as the fruit of "fine craftsmanship."
23. My husband and I do not have to stitch together multiple low-paying jobs. And no shift-work for us. If we need to be at a parent-teacher conference during the day, we can take time off.
24. Our working hours fit inside regular hours offered by child care centers.
25. I don't eat dinner on my feet while commuting between Job 1 and Job 2. I'm not entirely exhausted.
26. I do not find myself walking on the side of the road to get somewhere. I do not take buses, let alone wait for them. Why don't they put benches in all the bus shelters, anyway?
27. The brakes in our car are in good shape, since we can afford to keep the brakes in safe working condition; ditto the tires and the rest of the car. Therefore, we are safer than families who can't do that. Therefore, we don't rack up tickets for driving a sub-par car, or even wind up in trouble with the law if the tickets we've been issued accumulate faster than we can pay them and we wind up owing court "fees" that multiply pretty quickly as well. (Hello, bill collector.)

---

<sup>3</sup> The May 2016 Federal Reserve report "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2015" found that "if faced with emergency expenses of \$400, almost half of the 5,600 respondents said they either would not be able to cover the costs or they would have to sell something or borrow to do so." (*New York Times*, November 13, 2016, Sunday Business section, page 4.

28. My boss won't say right in front of me that he or she is planning to replace workers like me with a new machine or new technology.
29. I don't work in a shop where I have to "parrot" prescribed sales pitches and greetings, nor does a supervisor instruct me from afar over a headset that I am required to wear. (It's as if supervisors don't think employees can act with integrity.)
30. I have some autonomy at work, from when I can take a break to when I can get a cup of coffee, and I am able to make some recommendations and decisions. There's no poster that says: "TEAM, Together Everyone Achieves More," trying to convince me against all apparent evidence that I have an important role to play where I work.
31. I have the option to "tele-commute."
32. If I am unlucky enough to get hurt on the job, I won't be threatened with deportation by my boss if I ask him or her to help me with the resulting medical costs. My job is on the books and workers' compensation is available to me.
33. People don't make negative snap judgments about me because of the quality of my clothes or shoes.
34. Contractors assume people who live in my zip code can pay our bills, so they return our phone calls and show up. Shady companies don't mark us as a likely target. We aren't desperate enough to want to believe false sales pitches.
35. We can afford to make regular technological updates to our phones and computers. Some family members have "smart phones." We each own a computer and have speedy and effective internet access. The children already knew how to use a computer when they started school, and they can print out their papers and/or submit them online at home, no walk to the library needed.
36. Our experience would lead one to think that the American Dream works. With that being said, we can see that it doesn't happen for everyone and is getting tougher to attain.
37. Driving a car to the school or a job doesn't put me at risk of deportation should I be stopped by the police for a missing taillight, or because another car hit mine, or because I was just in a hurry. I don't live in routine fear of being separated from my family.
38. I trust that I will be treated well everywhere, and given the benefit of the doubt when needed. I am unlikely to be "dressed down" in public by an authority figure.
39. I didn't have to sit my children down and give them "the talk" about being safe.
40. I don't wonder if the truck flying an enormous flag in back is trying to send me a message.
41. I can send our children to school wearing coats and with the necessary pencils, notebooks, page protectors, binders, calculators, paper, etc.
42. Our shoes don't hurt.
43. I can afford feminine hygiene products for myself and my daughters.
44. I have a government ID. If I had to, I could afford to take time off to travel to the DMV to get a non-driver's ID.
45. The furniture in our living room (we have a living room) *is* "living-room furniture."
46. I think love is enough. Why would I be suspicious?

Some income data seems relevant here. I've seen that public benefit programs don't provide enough to live on. The ALICE figure,<sup>4</sup> which reflects the realistic income needed by a family of four to live for a year in Rockland County at a "very modest" level, is \$77,724. Families on public assistance get far less than this. To get SNAP, a family of four can't have an income above

---

<sup>4</sup> ALICE is an acronym coined by the national United Way organization. It means Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. That is, ALICE families work but just get by, and find it nearly impossible to save. See the United Way of Rockland website at uwrc.org. This figure was released in Fall 2016.

\$31,590; if your household income is \$40,000, much lower than the ALICE figure, you are just plain out of luck.

Anyway, this is my list of 46. In the process of compiling it, I learned several things:

**To admire people who have no choice but to tackle more than I have to**, with my invisible backpack of advantages.

**To know I can't assume that I understand anyone else's life**, let alone understand why he or she makes the decisions he or she does, or what his or her personal strengths and weaknesses are. The only way I can really appreciate other people's worlds is to listen to what they tell me, when they choose to tell me, and if they choose to tell me. This happens when I listen with respect.

**Not to judge a person or situation in haste**, if at all. I don't decide that anyone "should" change. I won't suggest some "solution" to some "problem" that I thought was occurring, but might not prove to be a problem at all if the actual facts were revealed. Whatever I do, from listening to answering a request for information, I will do with humility. I will not turn away.

Did my newfound knowledge help me serve families better? (In the past tense, because I'm no longer there.) The families would know the answer to that better than I would, but I did not explicitly ask them if my work improved as my approach adjusted to reflect these insights. We performed a needs assessment but not a follow-up survey. This shows that I have a way to go in living up to my ideals.

In my opinion, being open allowed me to build a wider circle of relationships than I would have been able to build otherwise. A lot of my time went into gradually getting to know people in a strength-based way, using regular events like preschool story hours. Informal interactions enabled me to have occasional conversations with a purpose, and some led on to referrals or resource sharing. Just about everyone turned out for fun events that our advisory committee and I planned, often with students' help. Many of the parents had different backgrounds than mine, and doubtlessly lower family incomes. (Most of the people I befriended were women, a limitation I didn't see how to fix.)

The people who were *least* like me and I did not become friends. They probably believed I didn't have a real understanding of their lives, that I didn't "get it." Inside my own head I may indeed have gained *some* understanding, but quite rightly the people without my advantages may still have wondered how robust my understanding was, and what purpose a friendship with me would serve. The trick is to meet a substantive need or interest they have or, to put it another way, to demonstrate that they are heard and that you are going to act. If they need an afterschool program for their children, for instance, you are going to try your hardest to make that happen; ditto for providing a translator, etc. That is, what they say has to be accorded power. If they sit on a school-family committee, they have to be the majority. Leaders in every community can be found to articulate these needs if you look for them.

---

*Thanks to Rockland's school-based Family Resource Center coordinators, present and past, for sharing their wisdom with each other and with me.*

*In honor of Harriet D. Cornell.*

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED BY AUTHOR