# Fred Ashmore

# ‘My clumsiness and inadequacy in the area of race and racism and privilege have recently been highlighted', The Friend, 2019

  Our Society is not very diverse, and London Quakers are keen to work on that. But our first steps in this area have demonstrated that this will not be a simple process. Our first effort, a privilege workshop, resulted in tears and distress. I found myself deeply shaken to recognise how easily and unthinkingly I have accepted my privileges as a middle class, white, male Quaker. Once, if you’d asked me whether skin colour mattered, I would unhesitatingly have said: ‘No, absolutely not.’ A rich ethnic mix of people visited and stayed at my parents’ house at various times, and I barely noticed. Our own house is shared with different ethnicities. But my being white does matter, even if my behaviour is considered unremarkably ‘Quaker normal’. All my life I have benefitted from certain privileges and contacts, or assumptions made of me, because I match the conforming normal of our culture. No one ever stopped me for driving while white. I never experienced stop Image: Rod Long / Unsplash and search when I was a scruffy, hairy Manchester teen. Police officers call me ‘Sir’. I swim in a sea of privilege and never notice it. White is normal, white is benchmark. As Peggy McIntosh writes in White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack, ‘white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks’. There’s nothing obviously wrong in this privilege. My parents would have been amazed to think of examining what lay behind bringing four children to well-educated healthy adulthood on a lecturer’s salary. I suspect that it was possible because they knew everything about the middle class English system, including how to work it and be accepted within it. That’s fine until you realise how many citizens of the UK have their opportunities suppressed – have their options fenced round by race, suffer microaggressions on a daily basis, or die younger after living poorer. My privilege is what black Britons do not have.

Awkward questions

So why did I find the first privilege workshop so profoundly disturbing? Do I have advantages? It doesn’t take much thinking to say yes to that one. And is there someone – or a group of people, or a whole stratum of society – with balancing disadvantages? Do my advantages and privileges come at a cost to someone or some group of people? I don’t like these questions and I don’t know how to respond to them. My instinct is to reject the basic proposition, since my values are very Quaker: equality, truthfulness, peace and simplicity. I was recently exposed to the concept of white fragility: the hesitation of white people to really think about systemic privilege. This fragility concept is a creation of the antiracist thinker Robin DiAngelo. In her studies she observed that some white people, when confronted with racial issues concerning white privilege, may respond with dismissal, distress or other defensive responses because they may feel personally implicated in white supremacy. Responses that I have heard in our Society since we began discussing these matters certainly bear this out. To be honest, my own response to these ideas was probably a classic defence reaction. Why am I writing about these difficult things, having no particular knowledge or expertise, merely an uncomfortable idea that these matters are deeply important? Because my clumsiness and inadequacy in responding in the area of race and racism and privilege have recently been highlighted. I want to work away at the sharp edges of my initial reactions, to experience them in a safer manner, and to become a ‘diversity and inclusion ally’ to use Nim Njuguna’s useful term (see the Friends Quarterly, issue one 2019).

Looking for answers A highly experienced facilitator we knew proposed a series of short learning sessions, to help us think and talk about being white, and to open ourselves to better awareness and sensitivity. She wanted participants to self-identify as white. We talked with her and thought that this seemed a reasonable and safe approach to examining white privilege and related difficult issues. We agreed to go ahead. The course was to run as four sessions, about two weeks apart. The publicity and promotion for the course was ambiguous about how it had been designed for white people. The ‘Being White’ flyers had a picture of girls of different races, which could be read as promoting a fully open course.

Personal failure One of the people who registered (let’s call her Anna) has skin that is not white. Anna thought that the course sounded really interesting. When she arrived on the first day and hung up her coat, our facilitator was very surprised. We began a few intense minutes of interaction in the corridor, which made it clear to Anna that the course wasn’t meant for her. I was there at this discussion and feel pretty ashamed of my slowness to realise that we had got it completely, horribly wrong. Factually, never mind our intentions, we were excluding someone because of skin colour – inside Friends House! As she left, Anna said that it was the first time in her life that she had been excluded from anything because of skin colour. And the other participants in the course knew that she was being excluded and tolerated it – unhappily, but we all tolerated it and stayed. Looking back, I completely failed to live up to being a diversity ally, despite my good intentions and professions. This incident led to some vigorous reactions from Anna’s Local Meeting and Area Meeting, and exchanges of emails. The matter is not completely resolved, though thankfully Anna has been forgiving of our stupidity and recognises the intentions behind creating a course designed for people who self-define as white. In the end, we started the course that day and worked through it with the other participants. It proved very mind opening. We participants learned a great deal about white privilege and quite a lot about ourselves and our ignorance and attitudes. I would like to repeat the course, since I think we were taking first steps and that there was much more to be worked on. If the course had been truly open to all, would it have been equally useful? That really is difficult to say. Our facilitator asked us on the first day about our attitudes to discussing racial matters, and whether we found it easy in the company of someone of a different ethnicity. Two of us said that they would find it more difficult. Some of us commented on the risks of using someone of a different ethnicity as a walking handbook on what it’s like in a white dominated society.

 Collective future Friends have committed to improving diversity and inclusion. Our next Yearly Meeting is going to have it as a theme. So what shall we do next to help Friends in their desire to see change? I remain ashamed about the incident at the first session of ‘Being White’, and I am pretty sure that our facilitator has similar feelings. But having failed once in important ways does not change the value of the course. Failure would be to pretend it didn’t matter or to fail to learn and change. It must be possible to run a course in which white privilege is examined but entry is open to all. Some of the participants might find it uncomfortable to talk about matters of race and systemic racism in a mixed group. But we need to be uncomfortable and get used to it. Privilege is an uncomfortable subject. These are uncomfortable things to think about. Trying to avoid or close off these conversations and interactions is not going to lead to true change. And learning to perceive privilege in action will help us understand and respond truly. We may – will – make other mistakes. But I hope above all that we will remember to speak out as true allies whenever we see discrimination, both within our Society and in the world. If we do this again, we must accept anyone who wants to come. Advices & queries 38 ‘Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. Do not let the desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions.’

* Fred is from Kingston Meeting.