

# CLASS PREJUDICE & PRIVILEGE

from the perspective of a counsellor -as-client

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'You don't understand',  
my insides screamed  
silently when I heard my  
therapist say the word  
'privileged.'

I lost the rest of his  
sentence. All I heard was  
one word that got under  
my skin,  
with its implication  
that I 'didn't know how  
lucky I was.'

After about three months of weekly sessions, I'd dared reveal a little of my shameful admission to being 'posh', deliberately using this unposh word to soften the blow. I'd spoken dismissively about public-schools and scathingly referred to my father's 'old school tie' connections. Was I naive to expect anything other than the usual 'chip on the shoulder' response about having had a roof over my head, food and education? What had I hoped for? Sympathy perhaps, though any attempts during my life

at having a moan had never received any. 'It wasn't that bad,' was the usual tone of family and friends and I'd rarely risked broaching the subject outside familiar territory.

'How dare he,' I thought I wasn't in the mood to be fair, or to understand my therapist's lack of understanding. Being expected to understand as a way of making allowances had also been part of my life story. At that moment, as far as I was concerned my therapist was as bad as all the rest.

My snarl quickly subsided. In hindsight, I think that was the moment when the forbidden wail, 'It's not fair' finally erupted after forty years of silence but I wasn't ready for more than a token protest. For the time being the subject was too touchy to explore further and I tested out my anger on less-explosive topics. Having retreated, this one lay low, until our relationship was such that it could survive what seemed bound to turn nasty, on my part at least.

I didn't believe a word he said about 'You're welcome here, whoever you are,' and 'I like the way you speak.' How could he not be disgusted, let alone like me, after I'd made my full confession, and how would I ever make him believe the downside of being 'posh'? It took many months of tentatively exploring projection and of learning that he did mean what he said and didn't lie, before I included my jewelry box among the collection of mementos I regularly brought into therapy sessions. Intending to scatter my diamond rings and a couple of heirlooms onto the floor with nonchalance, I was tied fast by my embarrassment, held my box close and lifted the lid slowly inch by inch. Then all of a sudden I was enjoying myself, showing off my treasures. But when I looked up, equally suddenly I was horrified by my daring and slammed the lid shut again. Ok, I'd survived, and as far as I could see my therapist was still interested in what I had to say and still seemed friendly. But you never knew...

Over the next year the subject of class came up frequently but in a more objective manner, since my study of middle-class had now turned into a historical one. This was safer territory.

I was fascinated to trace the source of who I'd become back across generations of civil servants, soldiers and crusty Victorians. I needed to place my experiences into a broader context. I shared my discoveries as they came thick and fast; as well as enjoying my fascination, my therapist did also admit to and apologise for his earlier insensitivity. As I scribbled essays on suppression and pretence, on envy and fear, and exposed myths about affluence and comfort, I was rewarded by his surprise and at times even shock. This increasingly encouraged me to uncover my personal history of emotional and physical deprivation.

Hearing him say that he now regarded me as his authority on the subject was what did it! With a rush of pride and an amazing belief that there could be some advantage to being me after all, I took a giant step into my world of shame. Cross-legged, body scrunched and toes curling, my mouth opened one day and out it all came - the language, the vocabulary, the manners and mannerisms that all went towards making a person 'my sort.' Eyes glued to the carpet I continued, squeezing out more and more 'confessions'; when I got as far as how to hold a knife I thought I'd reached rock-bottom. My insides shrank and I curled up as small as possible, defending myself against the inevitable 'beating'. It didn't come. Instead, I was encouraged to break all the rules I'd drunk in about acceptance and being non-judgemental; I was allowed to despise and jeer and own all my prejudice and loathing against those who'd subjected me to such a prejudiced upbringing. I was allowed to moan and whine and complain about the

hardships of school and sneer at the facade maintained at home for the sake of appearances. Understanding I had a-plenty, compassion even; but when either threatened to strike me dumb, we both reminded me there'd be time for that 'me' later....

I was still partly scared that I was condemning myself with my own words; part of me couldn't quite believe that my therapist wouldn't 'tar me with the same brush' forever. But I took the risk and how glad I am that I did. How amazing to be respected for my honesty, and to be reminded that I was not automatically 'a chip off the old block.' How much more amazing to enjoy 'being so naughty'! How much more amazing still to find myself actually 'in' the very process I'd learned so much about - feeling feelings, and it really worked....! What relief.

It hadn't 'turned nasty' after all; we didn't fight, as I'd anticipated, not about this anyway. I began to trust in my own determination not to put up with being misunderstood. I was no longer scared that I'd be identified simply by the way I spoke. I decided that image wasn't necessarily about sham, that I had a lot more freedom to be who I wanted to be, and that I could enjoy choosing how to represent myself.

I'm glad to know that I'm no longer swinging between the two extremes of desperately clinging to or disdainfully detaching from my inherited past. Now I don't identify myself so strongly by where I came from, I can bring in my upbringing as

just one more part of myself, no more or less dominant than any other.

I owe this state of acceptance, ironically, to indeed being privileged. Not the kind gained from birth and placement that remains a point of conflict, albeit matured and clearer, between my therapist and myself but I feel privileged to-believe in my 'free spirit' self. It's this 'me' that I've reconnected to after a long long time, who can perform the miracle of transforming experiences outside my choice and influence to adopt them as mine. My innate curiosity of how people tick was never lost, but my childhood training in critical study of every nuance of style, accent, dress and behaviour has become one of the strongest assets I have, for myself and to offer my clients.

With all that's gone before 'in the bag,' surely I may hope to integrate in a similar process the sexually abusive experiences that are as much part of my particular childhood as the class I belong to. I reflect on the de-shaming of myself class-wise as one more paving-stone in the path to the 'safe place' we're creating for me to re-member my most fearful experiences. It's fear that still holds them in part-silence - fear of shame and of fear itself.

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